

# Getting it Right (If Even for Only the Briefest Moment)

Palm Sunday

March 20, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday is a crazy day! Frankly, it is maddening – and when Palm Sunday falls in March as it does this year, Palm Sunday is the perfect example of “March Madness.” Oh, I realize that March Madness usually refers to the Women’s and Men’s NCAA Basketball Tournaments and the craziness that ensues. But let me share with you an irony – today’s sermon title, “Getting it Right (If Even for the Briefest Moment)” has a twist with which I was going to conclude this message but choose now to introduce from the beginning. Palm Sunday was a day when most of the people of Jerusalem did *not* get it right. We, like those of Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago, will clutch our pieces of palm and think of the glory of a parade where the words were Hosanna! Praise the LORD! Blessed is the One Who comes in the name of the LORD! We had better remember how hollow were those words! We had better remember that many of the same people who shouted “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday called for Jesus’ crucifixion just five days later on what we theologically call “*Good Friday!*” We had better remember how quickly people in the throngs changed their tune, changed their allegiance, and were anything but consistent in their faith or their devotion.

March Madness! Little did I know I would be presented with two examples of March Madness this very weekend. Here we have the first day of spring and nature has pulled “a fast one.” I slipped and nearly fell when my feet hit the first piece of ice on the driveway this morning! This is hardly spring-like weather! I am certain there will be some snow on the ground or least in mounds come Easter Sunday when some of us brave the cold and are out there at 6am for the “sunrise” service. There *will* be piles snow at the west end of the parking lot – limiting how many parking spaces we have on a day of pretty high attendance.

March Madness! Little did I know that the best example of craziness and indeed the best illustration for this sermon to come from the current NCAA tournament has little to do with the game of basketball itself! Two nights ago in Oklahoma City, four teams gathered to play two games of basketball. Fans of Kansas, Northern Iowa, Wisconsin and Bucknell, a university south of us in Pennsylvania on Route 15 enjoyed all the hoopla that night of March Madness entails. In the first game, the Wisconsin Badger fans, dressed in red, enjoyed a win over the Northern Iowa Panthers, whose faithful were identified by the color purple. In a game of strange bounces, there was some logic to the outcome of that game as the sixth seeded Badgers beat the eleventh seeded Panthers. In the second game, the Kansas Jayhawk fans should have outnumbered those rooting for Bucknell, identifiable by orange. Yes, the 14<sup>th</sup> seeded Bucknell Bisons went on to shock the 3<sup>rd</sup> seeded Kansas team, but that is not the story! You see, Bucknell is on Spring break and the college band is scattered around the country. Bucknell had to borrow a band! When their game was over, the Northern Iowa band members took off their purple, put on orange shirts shipped to them from Bucknell, played music that had been faxed to them, and

along with the Northern Iowa faithful, shouted and caroused and hyped up the Bucknell team as though they were their own. Just think how confused people in the arena who were unaware of the circumstances must have been. Bands have a certain flair, certain characteristics, and so to the uninformed, it must have been baffling to think that you had just seen a band sit the same way, move the bells of their brass instruments in the same fashion, and to have the same chants come from their mouths – only with slightly different words! To make matters worse for Kansas' fans, the Wisconsin faithful cheered for Bucknell. Their agenda was selfish as those of Wisconsin realized they would rather play Bucknell than Kansas in the game this afternoon. Just two hours before, you would have thought that fans of Wisconsin and Northern Iowa were bitter enemies – you know how crazy these crowds get – and here they were, one hundred and twenty minutes later standing shoulder to shoulder as the best of allies!

March Madness. The same crowd, standing in the same part of the city of Jerusalem, with the same fervor and “enthusiasm,” cried Hosanna one day and Crucify five days later! The disciples sensed by this time that Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem meant something other than that for which they had originally dreamed. There was to be no restoration of the Kingdom of David, there was no earthly throne on which Jesus would sit with two of the disciples at His side. The disciples had their moments of confusion, but by this time there was probably a sense of foreboding, that this trip to Jerusalem would be bittersweet at best and potentially horrific. The rest of the people were a strange mix – much like a mix of Bucknell, Wisconsin and Northern Iowa fans two nights ago. There were those who wanted to see someone, perhaps this Jesus, find a way to throw the Romans out or perhaps replace the corrupt rule of King Herod. Some in the crowd, remembering the words of the 118<sup>th</sup> Psalm, hoped this was a fulfillment of a prophecy of a “festal procession” of the LORD. Others were hoping for some holy, God-given moment when God's wonderful reign on earth would commence. Others, like many in the arena in Oklahoma City this past Friday night simply got caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment, went along with the crowd, pulled for an “under-dog,” and shouted whatever others were yelling. Considering what followed in that “Holy Week,” this was not the population of Jerusalem's best moment. It is *not* an example of people getting it right. If our Hosannas are just as empty, just as full of hopes and dreams that God will come down and fix things according to our will, our agenda, our wishes, then we are not getting it right either.

So – when are these precious brief moments when we get it right?

- We get it right when we act in gracious and loving ways. Remember the prevalent phrase of just a few years ago, “acts of random kindness?” I think the expression has been forgotten as “acts of rampant vulgarity” and “rabid arrogance” seem to be the bywords of today's culture and life! We have an opportunity to act in very kind ways next Sunday when more people come to worship than usual. Attendance will be high on a Sunday when our parking lot will probably be somewhat smaller than usual because of mounds of snow. Rather than complaining about these C&E Christians, those who only come on Christmas and Easter, how welcoming, gracious and nice it would be if twenty to thirty of us parked next door – where we have formal permission to park – and how, if we want our usual pews we get here early so we don't feel frustration on what should be the greatest day of our church year!
- We get it right when we celebrate what it means to be part of God's family. In a few moments we embrace eight new members of this congregation, born on three different

continents. What a blessing to witness this congregation invigorated by the power of the Holy Spirit in such a wonderfully welcoming way!

- We get it right when we embrace the ways of heartfelt sharing and giving – not because we expect anything in return, but because as people of God we want to give of ourselves in a fashion that mirrors the God’s gift of an Only Begotten One on our behalf. For example, in our moments of sharing, be it our regular offerings or today’s invitation to give for mission in One Great Hour of Sharing, would that our generosity be characterized by a wish to give of ourselves as genuinely as Christ gave rather than through some kind of “going-through-the-motions” nominal begrudged act!
- We get it right when we celebrate the Good News of this Holy Week and make it part and parcel of our daily living for the rest of our lives. The Good News is that we are granted redemption and forgiveness despite the sometimes shallow and hollow hosannas of Palm Sunday, our neglect of the sacrifices of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and our fleeting embrace of the hope and joy of Easter.
- We get it right when our enthusiasm and fervor and embrace of Holy Week – from the day of palms to the day of resurrection is not an example of March Madness but of faithful living grounded in the gifts of the Good News of God in Christ – gifts of unbridled joy, unceasing hope, unshakeable faith and unending love.

Amen.