

After All the Hoopla

April 9, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 50:4-9a

John 12:12-16

He knew what the people really wanted. He knew they would be disappointed. He knew He did not measure up to what they expected. He knew that after the parade, after all the hoopla, there would be a major letdown. He knew that by the time the palms torn from the trees, waved in praise and strewn on the road were part of the dust on which the donkey's feet walked ... he knew that the same voices that on that day cried Hosanna would, in approximately 120 hours (but who counts things like that?) – would be yelling another three syllable word that would be a far cry from Hosanna.

Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna! Crucify! Crucify! Crucify!

It is called a “tipping point.” Two weeks ago, the editors of TIME Magazine presented a case that contends our planet is at an ecological “tipping point” – that we either do something about global warming or disaster is inevitable. The exact moment that something reaches critical mass, reaches a “tipping point” can in some instances be debated – and God knows people want to debate the reality of global warming! When was World War II inevitable, reach a tipping point? At the end of World War I when the world took revenge on Germany? Was the “tipping point” when Hitler sat in prison and wrote “Mein Kampf?” Was it when the Wehrmacht crossed the Rhine River and entered the Rhineland on March 6, 1936 and nobody complained? Was it when Chamberlain sacrificed the peoples of Czechoslovakia for “Peace in our time?” Certainly it was before September 1, 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland and the war officially started!

Although Jesus and His disciples moved inexorably closer and closer to Jerusalem during His three years of ministry, and even though He knew what “going to Jerusalem” *really* meant, it wasn't until Jesus actually entered the city gates on what we call Palm Sunday that the “tipping point” was reached and His bloody death became an actual, inevitable and soon-to-occur event.

Here we are on another Palm Sunday, entering Holy Week with all of its emotions, all of the turmoil, betrayal, treachery, ... and the human part of us must still want to join the disciples and the throng wondering if the day could not have tipped some other way, that Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem could have ushered in joy, praise, hoopla and ecstasy not just for those few moments on the Day of Palms but throughout the Passover Festival and on into months and years to come.

Jesus knew what the people really wanted. They wanted a king. They wanted a LORD of LORDS. They wanted a restoration of the Kingdom of David. They wanted the Romans – those who wore the uniform and all their cohorts – returned to Rome. They wanted political, economic, social and total religious independence – and here, entering the gates of Jerusalem, albeit rather humbly on a donkey, here, entering the gates of Jerusalem was the answer, the solution, the one promised of the ages Who would set all things right. And what did Jesus do? In the words of our final hymn, he rode on, rode on into the turmoil of Holy Week. He rode on to die!

Jesus knew the people would be disappointed. Jesus knew He did not measure up to what the people of Jerusalem expected. Jesus knew that after the parade, after all the hoopla, after those few, fleeting moments of praise, there would be a major letdown. Jesus knew the voices that cried Hosanna on the Day of Palms would cry for his death by the end of the same week. And He did not quit. He stayed the course. He rode on. He persevered. He kept the faith. He clung to the promises of His God. Long after the praise, long after the hoopla, long after the palm fronds were no longer fresh and green, He kept His appointment with all of the events we call Holy Week. After the hoopla, Jesus kept on going.

How often we quickly let the energy of life's high moments wane! Just think of how often quickly life returns to a sense of normalcy after a parade or festive time. Just think of the let-downs we experience after the highs of life! I wonder, ... have the peoples of Maryland and Florida already moved on from the NCAA Division 1 Basketball Championships won by teams from those states? The incredible joy and celebration of the female Terps and the male Gators – is that already history? Have we as a nation already forgotten the “March Madness” that brought us the “Cinderella” Patriots from George Mason and the disappointment of so many others? Once the hoopla is past, once the excitement is history, once “our” favorite team has lost with a ka-thump, what then? ... For a nation of people with short attention spans and the need for the thrill of the moment and immediate results, I suppose now it is time for the Masters or baseball or the National Hockey League's playoffs, so who cares about basketball?

So, after the hoopla, after the high moments, after the fleeting excitement of moments of conversion, after Damascus Road experiences, Transfiguration and Jerusalem Palm Sunday moments, after the occasional emotional high of religious fervor, what then – are we prepared for the long haul, for weeks if not years of perseverance, service and hard work? Or do we insist that our faith and in particular our times of worship only and always thrill us, inspire us with enthusiasm, and be characterized by continual “highs?” Just think of the people who hop from church to church to church, ever seeking yet another moment of “true” conversion, another incredible religious moment – and always, in the end, left empty because what they think they need is the constant hoopla, what they think they need is the endless waving of palms, what they think they need are the thrills of the faith – and none of the rest of Holy Week's realities and its call to hard work, service, sacrifice – and yes, even betrayal. In fact, the question is whether we want to move on from today's moments of hoopla. Do we “ride on?”

As for Jesus, life for each of us has moments when we are tempted to be disillusioned, let-down, disappointed, even in despair over the behavior of others – just as others will often feel disappointment in us. Our human lot leaves us vulnerable to the tragedies of misconceptions, misplaced priorities, misplaced demands on our time and energy. But if Jesus is our model, if Jesus is our example, and if He beckons us to follow in His steps, then we will carry on, persevere and “ride on.”

Just think how often we Christians dream of peace – in our lives and for all people on this globe – get caught up in the wonder and hoopla of visions and expectation born of the divine and then find those visions thwarted by the human realities of strife and war. Just think of how tempted we are to throw up our hands in despair and give up! Instead, we are to “ride on,” carry on, persevere!

Just think how often we Christians dream of cooperation among people, examples of grace and reconciliation in our midst and then are, instead, confronted with complaining, moaning and groaning. We seek to speak the truth in love and, on occasion, misstep and cause more harm. Rather than giving up, “throwing in the towel,” running away from the negative “vibes,” we are to follow our model – the model of Jesus Who on Palm Sunday rode on even though He knew what lay ahead. Instead of giving in, we are to “ride on.”

“Ride on!” could easily be part of a daily litany whenever we are discouraged, disappointed, tired, find work to be drudgery, all to the point of being ready to give up. I am reminded of the “Far Side” cartoon by Gary Larson that depicts two deer standing on their hind legs. One says to the other, “Bummer of a birthmark, Hal!” “Hal” is depicted with concentric red circles clearly marking a target! The issue will be to find the resources and wherewithal to withstand what ever comes our way. We can’t simply say to those who are burned out in their job, “buck up, ride on and persevere.” We need to encourage, embrace, and help each other find ways to recharge our spiritual, emotional and physical batteries so that we can “ride on.” Sometimes, even the “energizer bunnies” in our midst find themselves, after the hoopla moments if not the everyday moments of life depleted, exhausted, and unable to go on. That is when we need to make sure the community of faith is there to assist a person to do as Jesus was able to do alone – ride on.

In many Christian traditions, today is not Palm Sunday but Passion Sunday, when the entire Passion Narrative is read, the entire account of all that happened starting with the waving of palms on Sunday through to the death and burial of our LORD on Friday. When it comes to the Gospel Lesson for today, we had a choice – the five verses from John 12 that tells the story of Palm Sunday or the one hundred and twelve (!) verses of the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of Mark that comprises the Passion Narrative. The longer text might be good to read for persons who won’t be able to attend the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, who otherwise are only here on a day of celebration we call Palm Sunday and then a week later for the biggest celebration of all, the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter. But for many of us, that is to get ahead of what needs to be shared today: coming to terms with the hoopla of Palm Sunday and the let-down in the immediate aftermath, when it became obvious to the crowd that Jesus was not the King, LORD, Ruler, earthly Sovereign and Head of State they were expecting.

Today’s reading from Isaiah is actually one of the Passion Sunday lessons. Please recall its prediction of how the prophets and Jesus would suffer much humiliation before their final vindication. In the context of today’s words about Jesus riding on into Jerusalem and facing all that would unfold after the hoopla, hear again these few verses from that section from Isaiah – and how it encourages us when we are weary, discouraged, let-down - all of those ways we define times that are anything but hoopla:

The LORD God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to *sustain the weary with a word*. ... *Let us stand together. Who are my adversaries?* Let them confront me. *It is the LORD God Who helps me*, ... Isaiah 50:4a, 8b, 9a

Ten chapters earlier in Isaiah, at the end of the fortieth chapter, we have those beautiful verses that remind us that we will, in faith, be “lifted up with wings as of eagles.” At one point, I worked for a Head of Staff who had a sign on his desk that read, “How can I soar like an eagle when I work with turkeys?” And I, apparently, was one of the turkeys! Again, no matter what, carry on, soar with the eagles, ... ride on.

And here is the dramatic conclusion to this message: Jesus is not just the model. Jesus is not just the one Whose riding on into Jerusalem invites us to “ride on” despite moments of doubt if not despair. Jesus rides *with us*. Jesus is there to stand by our side after the hoopla when less stellar moments take hold. Jesus is there to encourage us, give us the back bone we need, forgive us, redeem us and love us – and, as only the Divine can, reach out, take our hand, and walk with us – during the hoopla, after the hoopla, in all of the moments of our lives.

Amen.