

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 30 “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ tell him, ‘The Lord needs it.’” 32 Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” 34 They replied, “The Lord needs it.” 35 They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. 36 As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. 37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 38 “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” 40 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

In the movie Groundhog Day, actor Bill Murray is stuck in the same day time and again until he finally gets it right. Throughout the movie he tried day after same day to win the love and affection of the same woman. He tried to set up the perfect scenario to bring them together. But the more he tried, the phonier it was. She could tell and she rebuffed his advances every time ó so much so that he finally gave up.

It might seem like Groundhog Day as we try to re-create the excitement of that first Palm Sunday year after year. What do we do? We order some Palms, walk around in a circle, and lay them before a fake cross. If we really wanted to be authentic, maybe we should have rented a donkey and a guy with a beard, and then had everyone take their coats off and throw it in front of him as he entered into church. But even that wouldn't have worked. The donkey probably would have done its duty in the church and the Jesus probably would have had a fake beard. There are some things you just can't recreate, no matter how you try.

When the Packers won the Super Bowl a few years back, I was so happy; shouting and jumping up and down; making a fool of myself. I'll always remember the day; and sometimes I like to watch the highlight reel again. But no matter what I try, I can never have it back; it will never happen again.

The original Palm Sunday was an incredible thing. Think about the reckless abandon with which they worshiped Jesus on this day. They didn't worry about whether their coats were stepped on by a donkey or not. They didn't worry about what damage they were doing to the palm trees. They wanted to honor Jesus as their king, and this is all they had to worship with. They didn't care about how they looked or what the Pharisees or teachers of the law thought. They shouted out to Jesus for joy.

What was it that created such joy in their hearts? **The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.** Think about some of the things they had seen. Luke reports of Jesus healing a blind beggar, ten lepers, and a crippled woman who was bound by Satan for 18 years. The other gospels also mentioned the wonderful raising of Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the grave for four days. People had seen some powerful miracles from Jesus, and many of them had probably at least known someone who had benefited from Jesus's gifts of healing and compassion. Excitement was high. It didn't matter that Jesus was on a donkey or that they didn't have any instruments. They were poised to praise Jesus. Notice also what they said of Jesus.

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

The first was a quote of Psalm 118. They were calling Jesus “the King.” Other verses in the Gospels also call Jesus the “Son of David,” very clearly equating Jesus with the Messiah to come. “Glory in the highest” was what the angels sang on the night of Jesus's birth, and peace on earth. These Jewish pilgrims were basically saying, “You have sent us your promised King ó the one that you have been promising for hundreds of years! Jesus is the One! He has come from heaven to bring us peace and salvation from our enemies!” (óHosannaó

means literally “save now.”). So they weren’t only praising Jesus for the miracles He had done, but even more importantly for who they believed Him to be: the Promised One divinely sent from heaven; their Messiah. Take this to its logical conclusion and they were celebrating because God was coming to town. This moment was the culmination of what had been groomed in their hearts for years by the word of promise in the Old Testament. They were excited, and they should have been.

It’s really kind of rare to find such excitement and worship in the Bible. Just off of the top of my head I was trying to recall the greatest celebrations in the Bible. Two that came to my mind were from the Old Testament at the temple. When David was installed as king one of his priorities was to bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. The ark had been more or less left behind during Saul’s reign in Israel. So David went to the house of Obed-Edom to retrieve it. On the way home, 2 Samuel describes the celebration.

David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. (2 Sa 6:12)

Another one that came to mind was at the consecration of the temple of Solomon.

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. 3 When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying,

“He is good; his love endures forever.”

King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God. The priests took their positions, as did the Levites with the LORD’s musical instruments, which King David had made for praising the LORD and which were used when he gave thanks, saying, “His love endures forever.” Opposite the Levites, the priests blew their trumpets, and all the Israelites were standing. So Solomon observed the festival at that time for seven days, and all Israel with him—a vast assembly, people from Lebo Hamath to the Wadi of Egypt. (2 Ch 7:1)

It’s neat to see how sacrifice was mixed throughout the celebration. The only way they could celebrate and praise their holy God was through sacrifices that were made for their sins. So also Palm Sunday would culminate in the greatest sacrifice of all.

On this Palm Sunday celebration we didn’t sing and celebrate with the same reckless abandon. Even though we have beautiful instruments to help carry our songs, we still worry about whether our voices are in tune. We get wrapped up in the melodies or the instruments. Were we to be asked to put our coats on the road, we might say, “I paid a lot of money for this, I don’t want a donkey walking on it.” You’ve seen videos of sports heroes that come to visit children in hospitals. The kids, even though sick, start crying and they are filled with excitement. Ought that not be the case here?

That aura of excitement is so important to some that they leave church to find other worship services that they feel are more exciting; where people put forth more effort to get excited. Worship leaders are paid big bucks to perform in a way that gets people excited about Jesus and coming to church. People stampede from church to church in search of the most motivational speakers and music they can find. Sadly it ends up being a spiritual type of Groundhog Day; because worship never is exciting as it should be.

If you think about it, this first Palm Sunday was wonderfully simplistic. Jesus didn’t get a power point ready and they didn’t take weeks to practice and plan who would throw what coat where. The only prep that was made was to borrow an unused donkey for a day. They didn’t have any instruments. When the time came, they used what they had; some tree branches, old coats and plain voices; and it was a wonderful thing; because they were excited and focused where they were supposed to be; on the coming King - what He had done and what they believed He was going to do. They didn’t really care what kind of looks the Pharisees and teachers of the

law gave them; they didn't care what instruments they had; they used whatever they were given or could find to praise Him as king.

There's a reason why Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem. He did it in reflection of His humility, to show them the real reason He should be praised. Just as a donkey is a beast of burden, useful for carrying weight, Jesus came to carry the burden of our sins on the cross. Had Jesus ridden a great war horse, He would have run the risk of misleading the people into believing the lie that Jesus had come to overthrow the Roman government. People also could have been misdirected to the size and power of the horse instead of the beauty and glory of the humble King on it. In keeping with the prediction of Zechariah, Jesus kept the prediction true by riding on in humility; knowing that He was coming in to die for the sins of the world.

That's the reason why the cross is in the front and center of our church. That's why the baptismal font is prominent. That's what the Lord's Supper is celebrated every Sunday; because we still focus on the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Were it not for this sacrifice we could never worship our holy God with anything at all. He is the front and center of our worship. It is purposely designed this way. We don't want to be misdirected. There's still something simply majestic and awesome about the way that God still comes to us today. Think about what God promises us in baptism. The Holy Spirit actually comes in and through the water into the heart and soul of the baptized. Even though we can't see Him floating in the water, God's word says that He is there. Even though the water doesn't turn to red, we also have God's promise that we are bathing the child in the blood and righteousness of Jesus. Think also about the simple majesty of the Lord's Supper. As we receive tasteless bread and simple wine, we somehow and in some way receive the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ; that which was shed on the cross and raised from the dead; the living Christ! Oh, how He hides Himself! What powerful miracles take place here! A child has God's name put on him, and he is made the child of God! Sinners are fed with the body and blood of Christ, and with it they receive the forgiveness of sins; personally given to them under such simple elements. Just as Jesus used a simple and unimpressive donkey to come into Jerusalem to keep the focus on Himself, He uses simple elements such as water, bread and wine to ride into our hearts. Every step of our worship is connected to the sacrifice of Christ. Even our songs constantly point to the cross. We don't have to try and manufacture some sort of excitement through music or drama to get Jesus to come down here. God comes into our presence in the most hidden and powerless ways; through simple word and sacrament.

In spite of all of these miracles, some experience this worship and say, "Your worship is boring. I don't get it. I didn't feel the Spirit. I'm going somewhere else."

There are others of us who want to stop for different reasons. You may have prayed for Jesus to rescue your grandmother from death, only to see her suffer and die. You didn't have your Lazarus resurrection moment. You may have prayed for God to remove a temptation, only to seemingly let you rot. Maybe you were just tired; stayed up too late; hard to get excited on five hours of sleep. It's easier to mumble through worship than to actually sing and participate.

David's wife Michal didn't like how David worshiped God by dancing in front of the ark. She felt he made a fool of himself; didn't act dignified enough. She told him to stop. The Pharisees and teacher of the law said, "Tell your disciples to stop." One ancient drawing makes fun of Christians by drawing a donkey on a cross which says something like, "Marcus worships his god." We're tempted to stop because we don't see the miracles. Some want to stop because they're lazy and ungrateful. Others stop because they're mad at God for taking away their power. Many do. What about you?

Jesus said something interesting to those who wanted the disciples to stop, "**I tell you,**" he replied, "**if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.**" Some have taken it to mean the stones of the temple which were torn down by the Romans in 70 A.D. They "cried out" in testimony against the Pharisees and teachers of the law at their rejection of Jesus. Peter once wrote that believers are "living stones," built to "declare the praises of Him." Perhaps Jesus was referring to future Gentile believers, who were at one time as spiritually lifeless as

stones, who would then cry out praises to Jesus. Either way, Jesus was saying that He would be praised; no matter what the Pharisees tried to command.

When faith is strong you can't keep Jesus's name from being praised. Think of the apostles in the early church ó **They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.** (Acts 5:40)

The same rings true EVEN IN DEATH. In the Revelation from St. John he writes,

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." . . . Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Every day is like Palm Sunday in heaven! Yet it won't feel like Groundhog Day as we are able to do the one thing we will really enjoy. Nobody will be able to stop believers from praising God. As they stand fact to face with Jesus, their voices will naturally cry out. Death doesn't stop it, it only begins it.

Today may not feel like Palm Sunday. We may not act exactly sing and act like those hopeful did on Palm Sunday. Forget about all of that for a moment. Don't crawl back into your hole. Just look at Jesus today through the eyes of faith. Look beyond the donkey and the palm branches. Remember who rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and remember what He came there to do. He didn't come into Jerusalem just to be praised for miracles. He came into Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world; to perform the greatest miracle of all; where the Father would separate Himself from the Son and heaven would be put through hell. He accomplished His mission. If that isn't enough reason to praise Him on Palm Sunday and for the rest of your life, then keep quiet. God will find other rocks to praise Him. But as for me and my house, we will praise the Lord. Amen.