

Palm Sunday Reflections
John 12: 12-43
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from The Message
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First Scripture John 12: 12-19

(The Message)

¹² The next day the huge crowd that had arrived for the Feast heard that Jesus was entering Jerusalem. ¹³ They broke off palm branches and went out to meet him. And they cheered: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in God's name! Yes! The King of Israel!

¹⁴ Jesus got a young donkey and rode it, just as the Scripture has it:

¹⁵ No fear, Daughter Zion: See how your king comes, riding a donkey's colt. ¹⁶ The disciples didn't notice the fulfillment of many Scriptures at the time, but after Jesus was glorified, they remembered that what was written about him matched what was done to him.

¹⁷ The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead, was there giving eyewitness accounts.

¹⁸ It was because they had spread the word of this latest God-sign that the crowd swelled to a welcoming parade. ¹⁹ The Pharisees took one look and threw up their hands: "It's out of control. The world's in a stampede after him."

First Reflection on John 12: 12-19

Sean A. Kelly

What an incredible scene this must have been! Can you picture it? There is ecstatic cheering... There is a parade (although I venture to bet that it felt

more like a stampede as people pushed and shoved in an effort to get closer to Jesus)... This was a celebration unlike most of us will ever experience!

These people are celebrating the entrance of our Lord. The waving of Palm Branches symbolized the notion of victory over one's enemies - - They are hailing Jesus as a Victor! They are welcoming a Hero in anticipation of Jesus' next great act. This is the man that teaches with authority. This is the man that performs miracles. This is the man that raised Lazarus from the dead... Yes he is riding on a Donkey instead of a noble steed, but sometimes a King is NOT what we expect.

An early Messianic Prophecy (found in Genesis 49:10-11 & Zechariah 9:9) speaks of a ruler, whom will ride into town on a Donkey, and command the obedience of nations. All these details in the story are important. It is important that we take note of everything we are reading (from the waving of palms, to the donkey Jesus is riding on, to the reaction of the Pharisees), as these details indicate that something BIG was happening. Something different was occurring. Jesus wasn't an ordinary person. Jesus wasn't an ordinary teacher. Jesus wasn't an ordinary leader. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem indicates a new beginning... a new direction... a new hope!

But we know what is to come. We know the tragedy that is going to take place over the next several days. We know the beating/mocking/torture that Jesus is going to endure. They are waving palms as they would flags for the arrival of a national hero - - But would this scene look the same had they

known what was about to transpire? Would they continue to wave the palms triumphantly, or would they have laid them at His feet instead?

There is one question that continues to bother me - -How would we have acted? Would we join the celebration that was taking place or would we be overcome with grief as we dread the circumstances that we know are awaiting our Lord? What would we have done?

Second Scripture

John 12: 20-26 (The Message)

²⁰There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. ²¹ They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: "Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?" ²² Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered, "Time's up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

²⁴ "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. ²⁵ In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

²⁶ "If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.

We know and love Jesus, and just like these Greeks, there are people who come to us who want to know Jesus. Will we be reckless in our love when we meet these people, or will we walk away from them to ask permission, as Philip and Andrew did? I confess this part puzzles me. Philip walked away to ask Andrew, and then they both walked away to ask Jesus. Philip and Andrew must have been approachable, they have Greek names so they had a common connection for these Greeks, and we have heard of them in other welcoming stories in scripture.

When Jesus first called Andrew as a disciple, Andrew asked him, “Where are you staying,” and Jesus answered, “Come and See.” Philip invited Nathaniel to Come and See, when Nathaniel’s reply to Philip was, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” when Philip first told him of Jesus. This is a simple, but empowering invitation. But, this behavior of Philip and Andrew does not sound welcoming, it doesn’t look like they were reckless in their love. Why were they afraid simply to say, “Come and see?”

Shane Claiborne is a Christian activist and founding member of the intentional community, the Simple Way in Philadelphia, and I have heard him speak several times. The first time I heard him speak, he told the story of his desire to understand why Mother Theresa devoted her life to the work she did for the poor in Calcutta. He was finishing college when he and a friend began exploring this question. Why did she give up everything to follow Jesus in this

way? So, Shane asked around and to his great surprise they got Mother Teresa's phone number in Calcutta.

Shane and his friend called and were amazed when Mother Teresa personally answered the phone; they were so shocked they couldn't speak. When they pulled themselves together, they asked her why she did the work she was doing, her answer was "Come and See." Her invitation was that simple, and Shane and his friend went to Calcutta for three months. They worked and lived in Mother Teresa's community. They witnessed people who were reckless in their love, and it changed their lives radically. This simple invitation can be offered by each of us to those wanting to meet Jesus, Come and see.

As Jesus processed into Jerusalem that day, most felt he had come for the Jews, a select group, not for the Gentiles. Could this be what caused Philip and Andrew hesitate? They might have wondered if these Greeks, these gentiles, should see Jesus. In this passage, John uses this encounter to highlight the message that Jesus has come for all; that his teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection is not only for a select few. Jesus is saying, that it is time for him to be glorified, meaning it's time for his death and resurrection; it is time for all to Come and See.

Can you imagine this sea of eutrophic palm wavers, joyously celebrating the arrival of their king? People standing on tiptoe, with children on their shoulders waving their palms high, so high, hoping Jesus would see them. What would the Greeks, or any of the "outsiders" do? Would they try to act

like they belonged? Would they join in, even when they felt excluded, joining the celebration?

Would they stay and see? Or will they feeling excluded, uninvited, turn aside defeated and rejected? Would they feel like the leftover palms found on the ground the next morning, limp and trampled? Wondering why these disciples of Jesus hesitated to invite them, making them feel deserted in this sea of celebration? Also, maybe angry that they even tried to meet Jesus? Feeling more like outsiders than when they arrived, would they turn and walk away, throwing their palms on the ground?

Third Scripture

John 12: 27-36a (The Message)

²⁷ "Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? 'Father, get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. ²⁸ I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display.'"

A voice came out of the sky: "I have glorified it, and I'll glorify it again."

²⁹ The listening crowd said, "Thunder!" Others said, "An angel spoke to him!" ³⁰ Jesus said, "The voice didn't come for me but for you. ³¹ At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. ³² And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me." ³³ He put it this way to show how he was going to be put to death.

³⁴ Voices from the crowd answered, "We heard from God's Law that the Messiah lasts forever. How can it be necessary, as you put it, that the Son of Man 'be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?"

³⁵ Jesus said, "For a brief time still, the light is among you. Walk by the light you have so darkness doesn't destroy you. If you walk in darkness, you don't know where you're going.

^{36a} As you have the light, believe in the light. Then the light will be within you, and shining through your lives. You'll be children of light."

Third Reflection on John 12:27-36a

Nancy F. Dolan

Children of the light?! All of a sudden it feels like the light's gone out of this parade.

The crowd was so fired up. Ready to follow. Even those who were not so sure about Jesus began to pile on. Following was so easy at that point – the noise and excitement was compelling. As the numbers grew and the streets filled, more and more wanted to be a part of the energy. Then, when Jesus proclaimed, "the world's in crisis and Satan's going to be thrown out!" the onlookers couldn't get enough. The donkey bit was a little confusing – not a royal caravan or entourage – but if this guy can throw out Satan, I'm in! Of course I'm in!

But then Jesus changes the narrative. He surprises them. And nothing that he says next makes any sense. Jesus tells them he will die; not just die but be

put to death. Their Savior, our Savior, is going to die. Furthermore, he's going to do it willingly.

This makes no sense to the crowd. We are still trying to figure it out thousands of years later. A Messiah lasts forever. A Messiah doesn't die. How could this be? *This* is God's glory?! *This* is light in the darkness?! Jesus says he feels "storm-tossed" – imagine what the crowd felt.

We know the ending, but we can't jump into the story to explain to that crowd what *this* death will mean. But if we could...we might tell them why Jesus doesn't want to pray, "Get me out of this, God!" because he trusts God is going to save Jesus and us all with this death.

We might tell them that when Jesus says, "lifted up" he's talking about his death; but he's also talking about his resurrection to new life...and his ascension to eternal life with God.

We might tell them, on our good days, that your understanding of darkness changes when you have the light of Christ in you; a light that overcomes all darkness. We'd say that this light will not go out, despite all evidence to the contrary. On our *good* days anyway, when our belief is outweighing our unbelief.

Jesus has been turning things upside down his whole earthly life. I guess we should have seen this coming. That even in his death things would be upside down. But it's so difficult to see what is not right in front of us. It's difficult to believe when fear grips us, when worry overwhelms us, when we

are caught up in the darkness of grief, or sin, or just when things aren't going as we'd hoped.

The crowd does not know the ending. All they can see is the darkness before them. Did they begin to lay down their palms as they began to realize Jesus would die? Did they keep waving them to mark victory, or did those palms slowly drop to their sides in disappointment, grief and resignation? Did they continue to hold them high with excitement? Or, in anger and disbelief, did they throw them at Jesus' feet?

With only darkness before us, what would we have done?

Fourth Scripture

John 12: 36b-43

^{36b} Jesus said all this, and then went into hiding. ³⁷ All these God-signs he had given them and they still didn't get it, still wouldn't trust him.

³⁸ This proved that the prophet Isaiah was right: God, who believed what we preached? Who recognized God's arm, outstretched and ready to act?

³⁹ First they wouldn't believe, then they couldn't - again, just as Isaiah said: ⁴⁰ Their eyes are blinded, their hearts are hardened, So that they wouldn't see with their eyes and perceive with their hearts, And turn to me, God, so I could heal them.

⁴¹ Isaiah said these things after he got a glimpse of God's cascading brightness that would pour through the Messiah.

⁴² On the other hand, a considerable number from the ranks of the leaders did believe. But because of the Pharisees, they didn't come out in the open with it. They were afraid of getting kicked out of the meeting place. ⁴³ When push came to shove they cared more for human approval than for God's glory.

Fourth Reflection on John 12: 36b-43

Charles B. Hardwick

Isaiah knew it 600 years before Jesus was even born. And Jesus knew it on the day of his big entry into Jerusalem: People simply would not connect with him as he walked into town.

He had done all these signs; performed all these miracles. The people knew enough to start waving palms, but when the going got tough, would they really keep that up? Or would they just lay them down?

And then what about the people who started believing in him...but who were way too scared to take a step forward? They were a lot more worried about what other people thought, anyway.

And then what about...us? Where do we fit in? What about me?

To be honest, some days I fit all too nicely in the group of leaders who love human glory more than the glory of God.

I think a place where this comes up a lot is in how I spend my money. Now, I'm fairly generous—I give back around ten percent of my income to God's work in the world. But I could probably give back even more money without sacrificing too much of my standard of living. I told you last week that my

apartment is fairly small, but I don't need to live in the penthouse level of my apartment building, and I don't need to have two huge closets, and I didn't need to have an unobstructed view of the lake and the city and the sunset.

It's nice, right? And I love all of it. But I also like watching my peers' eyes light up when I describe my place. It is not much compared to where many of you live, but it's a lot nicer compared to where other pastors usually get to live. And when I tell them about my place, I get a little charge out of impressing them with it.

Human approval is awfully enticing. But in this case it keeps me from living fully for God's glory. If I had rented a more humble place, I could be spending a lot less on rent, which would let me give back even more generously, so that more people could experience more of the life that God wants for them. Every month I write a large check to gain more human approval; every month I am kept from writing a larger check for God's glory.

What part of your life has these struggles in it, where human glory threatens to trump God's glory?

It all makes me wonder if we had been there on that first Palm Sunday... would we be one of those first that John decries, throwing my palms down because we love human praise more than God's? Or would we be able to raise them up high because we would make God's priorities our own?