

## DECLARING YOURSELF

Each year the juxtaposition of Palm Sunday and Easter comes again to startle, to intrigue, and to unnerve us. If Jesus is only a man, then his story is only interesting. If Jesus is the Christ, then the patterns of His life reveal principles of LIFE that are inescapable. If that is the case, then the juxtaposition of Palm Sunday and Easter is not just history, it is how things inevitably develop, if they are developing at all. That means Palm Sunday is essential to the story of Jesus, but it is also going to get written into *your* diary. In other words, if Jesus is the Christ, then like Jesus, we will learn to weep at our victories, and go on to die and rise again into God's victories.

That first Palm Sunday was a victory celebration, at least as our world understands such things. The nation rejoiced, the crowds cheered, the righteous King came, and a wild enthusiasm of hope permeated everything. A new and better day was coming. People went to bed happy that night. Some of us remember V-J Day, or the day we won the big game, or the day we got married, or the day we got the job we really wanted, or the day escrow closed ... and so forth. If only we could keep living on the level of our victorious moments! But all earthly victories have one thing in common: They are short-lived. Monday follows Sunday. Stalin follows Hitler (and we act so surprised, as if we were actually fooled by our own propaganda). Marriage is followed by family life (and we act so surprised, as if nobody ever told us it would take time and attention and forgiveness and prayer and discipline). The truth is: After any worldly victory, the reality is that things are not settled. The real warfare is always deeper than we have imagined.

Some people think such perspectives sound pessimistic. That is because they try to build their lives on false hope. A pessimist is one who has no hope. Christians have enormous hope. They just do not like to put it on the wrong horses. They can afford to take the fallen, alienated condition of our world seriously – because they take the love of God in Christ Jesus seriously also.

On that first Easter Day, no nation was rejoicing, no crowds were cheering. On Palm Sunday they were cheering, but not on Easter. Isn't that eerie?! One woman in the morning and ten men by

nightfall knew that God had canceled the world's rules. From that day to this, in strange, quiet, unexpected ways and places, people awoken to the reality of Easter. Its power to transform is enormous beyond description. Because it is so different, and on a different plane, it is the only victory that does not backfire. Nevertheless, on Palm Sunday, huge crowds were cheering. On Easter there was no noise ... at least not in the outer world.

Each year the juxtaposition of Palm Sunday and Easter comes again to startle, to intrigue, and to unnerve us. What *is* this craziness about a God who is ONE, instead of a God who is “our God against our adversaries”? Who is this God who wants *everyone* to make it? Does God not know what kind of world has been created? How do we live and breathe in our kind of world with this troublesome God who dies every time we try to win? What can we do with our Palm Sundays – and will we ever dare to come fully into Easter? If this is indeed the Christ, the patterns of His life will be true for all time, and our choice is to notice, awaken, and understand ... or to go on from one little Palm Sunday to another little Palm Sunday, each one fizzling out, until our time here is over.

But why am I trying to tell you complicated stuff like this? Such thoughts get my head spinning and make my soul dizzy. Hey, I'm just trying to pay my bills, learn to be a halfway decent minister, and have a little fun with my family and friends once in a while. Can't we just all agree to keep it simple and friendly? The problem is, none of it seems to work for very long if we do not try to follow Jesus. And trying to follow Jesus keeps getting us back into what was going on with Him. So, simple or complicated, we try to follow. Not in some contrived attempt to mimic or duplicate Him, but certainly in some willingness to follow His lead into the themes and values and purposes of God.

So dizziness or no dizziness, that makes Palm Sunday fascinating. How do we follow Jesus into the Palm Sunday places of our own lives? How do we do that and not get stuck there – cheering the wrong things, celebrating victories that do not matter? Jesus, you may have noticed, was the only one weeping on Palm Sunday. (Someday maybe we can talk about the One Who Came Weeping, and what does it take to make the Son of God cry?)

For the moment, I hope you will keep thinking about your own life as I try to talk about Jesus' life. Jesus had a plan, a goal, a strategy. Aren't you supposed to have one too? His plan was commensurate with who He was, what His truth was. He had struggled to discern such things in years of study, prayer, and contemplation. Jesus consciously endeavored to bring His identity and strategy and plan into line with what He could understand of God's will and purpose. I believe in Him, so I am convinced that He succeeded in doing this. Talk about Mission Impossible! But the important point for followers (sometimes we are also worshippers and believers) is that He did this. Followers, then, will also endeavor to bring their own identity and strategy and plans into line with God's will and purpose.

Next, I notice that Jesus made His plans according to what would be appropriate *if the world was obedient and faithful to God*. Do we miss this point? Palm Sunday was designed to work *only* if the people of Israel could recognize Jesus' true identity and choose Him as their King, of their own free will – by their own choice, not by any outer coercion. In my view, a person who does not understand this has no glimmer of what was going on.

I am aghast. Jesus did not tailor the plan according to the way the world is – which, by the way, changes from day to day. Jesus designed Palm Sunday for the way the world *should be* under God. Everything about Jesus stretches people toward their true identity and destiny. Looking at this from the point of view of a follower, I am caught somewhere between amazement and alarm. I keep wanting to tamper with my plans and efforts so they will match the way I think things really are in this world. And I know the world is not ready or willing to be faithful to God – not yet ... not where I live. Doesn't that make a huge difference in the way we plan and strategize everything?!

Knowing this world – and its alienation from God – Jesus knew that His plan could not work. That is, it could have ... it should have – the potential was there. But it required that all or most of the people would respond according to their highest and truest selves; that they would want to serve and obey God first, more than their own opinions or desires; that they were truly committed and surrendered to God's will. To be sure, all the teachings of Judaism had claimed this as the promise and purpose of the Chosen/

Covenant People for many generations. The majority of those who opposed Jesus would have sincerely claimed that this was indeed true of them. Does that ever make you shudder?

Jesus knew that Palm Sunday would fail because He knew the people did not believe as they thought they believed and did not obey or worship God as they imagined they were doing. BUT HE WENT FOR IT ANYWAY! This is what is so amazing. He concluded that His own faithfulness to God required that He go for it anyway. Otherwise, how would anybody ever understand the truth of their own condition or the depth of their own need? The very failure of Palm Sunday reveals that God's plans for us are much higher than we have realized. And taking a second look, the Palm Sunday failure did not fail as much as we think. It set in motion the awakening that would call more and more of us into awareness of what we really care about most. Though the ship passed us by, its wake is drawing us still.

To the casual observer, this is no longer very interesting. But to *the follower*, this is crucial awareness – and part of our marching orders. Jesus came to the place where He had to declare Himself. He did not do so in the beginning. He did not do so lightly. But inevitably, when the time was right, He could not go on with His mission and purpose without declaring Himself. He had to come out in the open, or give up on the whole thing. What a terrible bind! It would not work, but it must be carried through. And the results, if any, must be left in God's hands. Of course, that is the only way anything of magnitude is ever accomplished. Left in God's hands, Palm Sunday and its aftermath have been calling people out of the world and into God's Kingdom ever since. The world has a hard time remembering that without crucifixion, there is no resurrection. It has an even harder time understanding that without Palm Sunday, there is no crucifixion.

We might say, then, that following Jesus includes at least these five necessities:

- 1.) Discovering our own identity and purpose. (Baptism.)
- 2.) Devising a plan – a strategy – that matches this identity and purpose, and which is in line with God's purpose for us. (The Wilderness – and subsequent prayer.)

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- 3.) GOING FOR IT – knowing full well that it will not truly succeed in our time. (The Ministry.)
- 4.) Going for it will ultimately require DECLARING OURSELVES – coming out in the open with who we are and what we are about – but carefully and prayerfully designed. (Palm Sunday.)
- 5.) Leaving the results in God’s hands. (Easter.)

All five are fascinating. All five are necessary. Today I hope to send you out of here pondering only the fourth necessity: DECLARING YOURSELF. We talk a great deal about the other four, but rarely about the fourth itself. It is the fourth necessity which stops most of us cold, most of the time. We do not like to declare ourselves.

I remind you, then, that we have a natural tendency to avoid declaring ourselves simply because it keeps us out of trouble and conflict. Jesus did not do it for most of His ministry either, for the very same reason. We do have to be careful. Timing is everything. We also talk a lot about being willing to acknowledge our faith – being willing to bear witness to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. But that is not the focus today. We are not talking about declaring *Him*. We are noticing that He declared *Himself*, and realizing that this probably means the time will come when we have to declare *ourselves*. You may want to remind me that we do not know our true selves except in relationship to Him. True, but after that, what about putting your own name and purpose and truth on the line?

Few people in the world ever really declare themselves. How many interviews have you watched on television? Infinite variations on how to sidestep anything that might reveal the truth within. There is no doubt about it: It is safer to live behind subterfuge, innuendo, hint, implication – and most of what we call “our declarations” have at least three escape clauses. To declare yourself is to break cover. If there are hunters around, it will draw fire. And there are always hunters around. Few of us care to run in the open with who we are and what our truth is. Indeed, we cannot do it very often, or carelessly, and survive for long. Jesus planned and timed His own declaration with extreme care and did *not* survive – humanly speaking.

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I am hoping we will see Palm Sunday afresh and notice what a shocking thing it really was – audacity to the tenth power. Palm Sunday was a naked moment in the history of the world. Without a stitch of apology – without any cover of titles or credentials, and without any loopholes by which to disclaim it later or say He did not really mean it – Jesus exposed His identity and His truth before all Jerusalem ... and the world.

That is finally what put Jesus at the mercy of men – exposure. He declared Himself. No more double-talk, parables, miracles, suggestive banter, or teaser titles like “Son of Man.” Jesus had said His last “Perhaps ...” His last “Maybe ...” His last “Have you considered ... Evidence might suggest ... On the other hand ... In my opinion ... According to an article I once read ...”

That colt, those palm branches, and coming through that particular gate with all the crowds cheering – could mean only one thing: “I am the chosen one of God, your long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, your rightful King. I am HE! The prophecy is fulfilled. Scripture has come true before your very eyes.”

Everyone in Jerusalem knew the language of that donkey and those palms. They had read about it and heard about it and prayed for it to happen since they were children – since their parents’ parents had been children. There was no question about Jesus’ declaration. The only question was: What would they do about it? Essentially, it was the last word and deed of Jesus’ public ministry. The rest was the reaction of the people. Jesus declared it, as He had said, “*as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other ....*” (Luke 17:24) Then He let it stand.

At first it looked like it might actually work. But we were only hearing from the friends and supporters. They cried “*Hosanna!*” – which means “Save us, we beseech you!” As it turned out, that meant it was okay with the supporters if Jesus would do it – clean up life for them, make life good for them – without much help, support, loyalty, or love on their part, of course. “Way to go, Jesus! You’re terrific! You take care of it. Sic ‘em!”

God had never settled for that. His Son was not about to either. His declaration required an answering declaration. Without that, we lose Him. And somewhere, in the dim recesses of our souls, we know

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that one day, in some way (in the faith and power of our Lord), we must each make our own declaration as unequivocally as He made His. This is not the “duty” of living men to face suffering and death – it is the JOY of dead men coming to life. With apologies to Dylan Thomas: Do not go silent into that last night.

Some people think it is strange that God did not punish us for killing his Son. Others smile sadly and say, “Didn’t he? Don’t you live here? What would it take to make you feel punished? Do you like the way things are here? The way people are treated here? The way things keep ending here?” To be sure, the punishment is to correct and not to destroy. Nevertheless ...

It is a terrible punishment that He comes and we miss it; that in our blindness and fear, we keep losing Him; that we fail to declare Him our King and follow Him. It is ever the message of Palm Sunday: support Him, live for Him, love Him back ... or lose Him.

If we say “*Hosanna!*” again today, we know what is at stake. We saw it happen before. We know the outcome for Him, and for us, if we do not back Him all the way. If we say “*Hosanna!*” again today, we know how much we have to mean it to make it stick. And we know it has to be for keeps. Otherwise, Good Friday is always waiting.

But also – yes, also – I hope you will go back home to think and pray about the time that is surely coming – when you must declare yourself as clearly and boldly as Jesus declared Himself. That is the question and the meditation I hope you will take with you into Holy Week.

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### PRAYER

Holy Father, we give You thanks for the great message of Your love, and our invitation to share in it. We thank You that it is simple enough for our minds to grasp – yet profound enough that all our wisdom and training and experience can ponder it for a lifetime.

Grant that we may pray as people who will surely act upon our prayers. And grant that we may act as people who have been long upon our knees.

And now, as we enter Holy Week, we ask for that which is the deepest yearning of our souls – though we do not always remember it, or say it in the same ways. We ask that we would be made holy – that we would be made into the shape and pattern of our Lord, Your Christ.

Make vivid the events we will recall this week – until they happen not just for us, but to us ... until our lives become Life In Christ Jesus. Then bring us, we pray, to Easter – not on the calendar, but in our souls. In the name of Him whose power can do this, we pray. Amen.