

Matthew 21:1-17

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

2 Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. 13 He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.” 14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry 16 and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes, have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’” 17 He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Today, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, where his entire ministry comes together. I think of Charles Dickens, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” and Jimmy Buffett’s “some of its magic and some of it’s tragic,” or as Ecclesiastes says, “there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” And these themes are present today.

There are two traditional options for today’s worship service: Celebrate Palm Sunday or Remember Passion Sunday.

The first one is a joyful gathering, and the latter is a somber reflection on the death of Christ. Many churches do the latter because otherwise, people would miss the reason for Easter. Easter is a day with power and joy, fueled by God’s thunderous “no” to the crucifixion and the powers that separate us from God. It is God’s proclamation of an eternal yes to life: Jesus’ and ours.

Both images are in today’s text because sometimes it is okay to enjoy life. Even when we know things are going to change or may take a turn at any time, we should enjoy and relish good things when we can. It will strengthen us for what the future holds when the winds change.

Today’s text begins as a fun day in many respects. It is a day for celebration; there will be time for pain and grief, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday await, and even right after the joyous entry, the

tone will change as Jesus enters the temple. We know it, and Jesus knew it, but still, sometimes it is good to celebrate the now in life and thank God for it.

Sometimes it's okay to have fun and celebrate good things, for things can turn on a dime. So treasure them when you can.

Today is one such day.

For Jesus, the day starts with people dancing in the streets to the chants of "Hosanna."

For me, I always associate Palm Sunday with children poking each other with palm fronds, and the choir, too. There is a bit of playfulness in our joy. And that is a good thing. We need to savor those moments when we can. So, smile at the memories of Palm Sunday and the little ones playing with palms in church, or even the choir tickling and poking each other, and parents trying to shush the children. They would not be shushed or stilled; they were caught up in the spirit of things. Indeed, treasured moments like these can make a world of difference in our lives.

Our story takes place as pilgrims are arriving for the Passover, and the city was awash with them. Men were fueled by the hope that God would overthrow the Roman Oppressors and restore Israel to its glory. Passover celebrates God's liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian enslavement and has become a source of hope whenever the Jewish people found themselves dominated by foreign oppressors.

To keep things calm, Pilate the Roman in charge of Judea was in Jerusalem with his troops, He wanted boots on the ground in case there was trouble.

Some scholars see the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as a bit of street theatre.

As Marcus Borg and John Crossan tell us, imagine there were two parades. First come the Roman troops. You can see them marching into the city like one of those old May Day Parades in the former Soviet Union, or North Korea, where the state's power is on display. Disciplined marchers and equipment of war, emphasizing military might to keep the peace, the Pax Romana, and to enforce Roman authority. It's not just a parade; it is a show of force.

In response to this awesome display of power, Jesus comes riding a donkey, the symbol of a humble, peaceful king. He is arriving to accolades, not as a conquering king on a warhorse, but one who comes in peace. He is greeted with the waving of branches and a path made of branches and people's cloaks. I wonder if any of the children then poked at each other with palm fronds? I bet they did.

There was quite a contrast in parades, one displaying the power of Rome, which was not to be crossed, and the other with the sheer joy of the kingdom of God and the arrival of this man of God. People joined even if they weren't aware that he was more than just another prophet. He fired up joy, hope, and excitement.

But this counter parade, led by Jesus, raises Roman anxiety and the religious leadership's fears.

Just who is this Jesus? He is a nobody from nowhere: Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pilate, and High Priest Caiaphas; they are all important names, unlike this upstart Jesus. They are challenged by the one they regard as an inconvenient problem from the boonies of Galilee, Jesus.

Even though he comes in peace, he also comes and enters the city as a king would, albeit one who came in peace. The commotion he stirs up puts all the authorities on alert. They have no room for Jesus or the trouble they fear he will bring.

In Jesus Christ Superstar, there is a scene where Jesus appears to be floating rather than walking as he enters Jerusalem. And he is enjoying the adulation of the crowd until the crowd sings “Hey JC, JC, won’t you die for me,” and his face becomes somber for a moment.

<https://youtu.be/OXDmfAB42z0?si=YzaTvVkmUndd8jhV>

The moment of pure joy can’t last, and he knows it.

Jesus knew things were about to change, during this day, not to mention this week.

So he enters the city after the joyful parade. And then continues on to his destination, the temple, where the fun is about to end. Just like life, it always does. So we should relish good times while they last, and take advantage of them when we can.

Our news is full of war, rising prices, especially food and gasoline, racism, prejudice, immigration, and the inability of the government to work for the common good due to the need to be oppositional. With that bombarding us 24/7, we all need time to celebrate, to sing “Hosanna!” with the children, and cry out with joy to Jesus. “Hosanna, save us” and dance to the music of hosannas.

Sometimes we need to sing along with Jimmy Buffett or our favorite singer, and sometimes it is okay to have fun.

Life will call for a serious response soon enough, so sing and dance while we can.

Today, let’s use all our senses to relish the joy that fills our lives with hope.

We can listen to music, look at pictures of happy times, places and people, eat something tasty, or light a scented candle, bake an aromatic goodie, and pet our fur baby.

In addition, we can seek our own joy in recreation or travel to visit someone we love.

Let’s take the joy as it comes because things will always change.

Jesus wants us to experience joy, so he refuses to silence his followers and the crowd. Even if they don’t fully understand who he is, he allows them to have a time of joy. Remember, as he teaches, he wants us to share his Joy as he says in John 15:11 -

11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

There is plenty of time for “Were you there when they crucified, my Lord?” but for a moment, Jesus wants people to enjoy life without reservation or recrimination.

Of course then things turn serious, as they always do.

Jesus heads to the temple and disrupts the buying and selling of animals and the changing of money. This is where he was headed.

While these were necessary services for pilgrims to purchase a sacrificial animal upon arrival, and to change the money into coins without the images of the Caesars on them, so that they could use them for sacred purposes.

Jesus is angry and hurt at the same time He cleans house, tossing out all the merchants and money changers as he cries out, “My Father’s house should be a house of prayer for everyone.” Why? Isn’t this overkill? What was wrong with the this marketplace?

In a lecture, John Dominic Crossan points out that Jesus protests the location of the marketplace in the court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews were allowed to come and worship God. They have set up shop in the place that helped make the temple a house of prayer for all people.

Jesus protests the system of sacrifice and currency exchange as symbols of the temple leadership's failure. In his mind, the temple has become an industry, led by those who have lost sight of its mission.

Its focus has become simply maintaining the status quo of the sacrificial system, keeping the peace, and prioritizing sacrifice and ritual over repentance. The call to change and sin no more, Jesus sees as absent from temple practice. And remember that’s how he started his ministry, with the call to repent.

He is not against tradition. But he is against the tradition that overlooks the need to change and live in love of God and Neighbor.

The same goes for the church; it has to guard against losing sight of its message of God’s love for all people and our need to change our hearts and minds.

You can be sure that any fear Pilate and the Jewish authorities had about Jesus creating a disturbance was amplified by this event. The Roman authorities were on alert, and the temple leadership was enraged and fearful about what might happen if things got out of hand.

This prophecy builds to the fateful confrontation at the end with his arrest, trial, torture, and execution by crucifixion.

Not to that extent usually, but isn’t that what life is like? There are times of great joy and great tragedy and everything in between. And Jesus knew where the week would end, but that did not stop him from enjoying his accolades as he continued his actions, teachings, and healings.

The tragic awaits, the worst of times, and I will follow Jesus down that path this week, but today the joyful magic is here, as I look forward to the best of times, the resurrection.