

Children love parades! America loves parades! They're fun! Joyful! Parades celebrate our heritage and traditions. We know parades, small town or large city: homecoming parades in high school or college; Fourth of July parades with marching bands and drill teams, ticker tape parades celebrating heroes of our culture from sports teams to astronauts to U.S. Presidents, the annual national parades such as the Tournament of Roses of Parade with the beautifully decorated floats of fresh flowers, more marching bands, equestrian teams to the sublime and fun Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with animated hot air balloons.

I was in a parade once; an Easter parade. I was about six years of age and it all seemed to happen at the last minute. I was put in this bunny outfit: like a toddler's footed pajamas, but this costume had big thumper feet, big floppy ears. I remember it fit around my face nice and snug. I remember the color too. And it was bright pink...as pink as one can get.

I stood on the float. I felt totally alone. I don't remember anyone else on the float but I'm sure there were other bunnies or something else Easter-like. I remember being a bit frightened, that I might fall off the float. Someone told me to wave to the crowds on both sides of the street. I was excited. I waved with a lot of enthusiasm. I was happy to see all those people, some waving back to me.

In a very short time I noticed my mother running along the sidewalk trying to stay up with the float. At 5'11", bright red hair, she stood out. She was looking

at me so I began to wave to her. And that's when my fears stopped. I couldn't take my eyes off of my mother. As much as I wanted to wave to the crowds I just zeroed in on my mom and kept waving to her. I was happy to she was there.

At that age, my mother was my singular focus!

Palm Sunday is parade-like: Crowds, shouting, celebrating - but this story is also one we wrestle with. It's both triumphant and somber. The air is highly charged. It's like an electrical storm here in southern Arizona: awesome one second, frightening the next. We sense apprehension because we know the events of the coming week.

Jesus joins in the Passover parade of pilgrims heading to Jerusalem. There is a display of pageantry with the garments spread out, the tree branches waving in the air. The shouts of "Hosanna!" are loud along the road as the Jewish pilgrims celebrate their historical liberation from slavery in Egypt. They also give voice to their frustration and anger at the present occupied forces of the Roman army. Into this highly politicized situation, Jesus enters the city of his enemies.

Jesus travels from the east, over the Mt. of Olives; its highest summit is several hundred feet above Jerusalem. As he reached the summit Jesus and those with him would have looked out across the Kidron Valley and the Holy City.

This isn't level ground. The terrain is rough, rocky, much like our desert landscape. But, it is sacred ground! David fled from Absalom to this summit.

Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord on this mountain top. Zechariah prophesizes that the Lord will appear, “his feet shall stand on the Mt. of Olives.” And after Jesus’ last Passover meal he retires to the foot of the mt. where the garden of Gethsemane lies. It is a very sacred place.

Jesus asks for and rides a colt, most likely, a colt of a donkey, as that was the main working animal in that area and at that time. He rides down into the valley, with the crowds before and after him spreading their garments, waving leafy branches, and shouting great Hosannas, **“Save us! Save now! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”**

But no one comes out from the city to greet Jesus. The “Hosannas” today are drowned out by the shouts next week, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

As early as the 4th Century, Christians retraced the procession of Jesus across the Mt. of Olives. And the processions have continued year after year, centuries upon centuries. Whether we’ve literally walked this hard-packed dirt, rocky path or not, fellow Christians have joined in the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem. We find ourselves here along the parade route; as curiosity seekers, as followers, sympathizers, or as idle watchers. **What is it that keeps us on the sidelines?**

Perhaps a parade for God is not what we want to join or support. We watch the crowds while standing flat-footed, unable to move. Fear of the unknown keeps

us from making a decision. We get stuck, in a rut, while it seems everyone else is moving forward. We lose our focus on Jesus and remain behind.

The wonderful news today is Jesus' singular focus on God. The disciples and others have told Jesus to stay away from Jerusalem. He goes anyway.

He will go and do whatever is required to be obedient to the Father.

Jesus knows what to do. Today is triumphant in that the people respond to a different kind of king. He rides upon the young donkey, a symbol of peace and humility, not war and pride. His focus is on God; our focus must be on Christ. He calls us to follow him not by conquering us, not by power, but by His Spirit of grace and love.

The crowds who accompany Jesus are seeking a "future of hope." We are not any different. While some follow, some will not. Jesus' power to save us comes through the Cross, a symbol that is not easy to reconcile. Can we follow a lowly Jesus who enters Jerusalem to face his last week? Are we ready?

I was involved in worship services at nursing homes back in Illinois. At one place there was a lady who never said anything. But she was constantly waving her hand, smiling and staring at me. She was in a wheelchair moving around throughout the worship service, always smiling and waving her hand.

One time I was preaching on eternal life, that belief in Jesus Christ would ensure an eternal life in heaven with God. Immediately, she responds. She shouts

out loud, “I’m ready! I’m ready!” I said to her, “I know you’re ready and I’m happy you are ready.” Her excitement and hope for salvation are much like the crowds following Jesus.

Those first followers of Jesus had a deep abiding hope that he was the Messiah and would save them. They followed him but they couldn’t picture how that journey along the rocky path would eventually turn out. We too struggle with the image of the suffering servant. Can we follow Jesus where he leads us? Can we leave the sidelines, leave the things that get us stuck in life; resentments, sorrow, anger, and fear?

It’s time to join the parade, no matter our fears, our apprehensions about the week ahead. Jesus may have been afraid. We don’t know for sure, but he never loses his focus on God. Jesus goes into the Temple, the symbol of Judaism and its power structure, that which he came to change, but he only looks around. What’s he planning? Are you ready? It may not feel like your parade, but this is your parade. **This is your time to join the parade.**

Somewhere in the 1980’s I was watching a parade. I think it was in Washington, D.C. It must have been a Fourth of July parade because I remember a lot of national pride. I remember a small contingent of Vietnam era soldiers, dressed in green fatigues, sort of haphazardly walking in the parade. They were walking together. The camera focused on them. The TV commentator said

something about how America had not truly welcomed home the Vietnam Veterans. As a country we had turned our back on them. There were 50-100 soldiers, walking along the parade route. They appeared to be saying to America, “Don’t forget us!”

Abruptly, one of the soldiers walked over to the sidelines, into the crowd. The camera followed him. He stood face to face with a man, also dressed in green fatigues. He gestured for this man to leave the sidelines and join them. You could see his gestures “Come, join us. You’re one of us. We have not forgotten you.” The man looked dejected, uncomfortable. He resisted the fellow soldier’s pleading. But the soldier wouldn’t give up, he kept talking to him and finally a beautiful thing happened. Together, they walked out of the crowds, arm around one another joining the procession. This scene of forgiveness and acceptance is exactly the kind of parade Jesus wants us to join. **We are not forgotten. We belong with Jesus.**

Jesus’ last road trip into Jerusalem is our time to not lose sight of him. Let us join Jesus, follow him, and be there for all that happens to him..., because in the life Jesus lived and died he is there for all that happens to us. Where is Jesus leading you in your spiritual journey? Are you ready to join the parade? Amen.