

### MARCHING TO ZION

In years past our Palm Sunday services have always featured a parade of children, waving palm branches as we sang our opening hymn, which was always the same, "All Glory, Laud and Honor." But that is not the case this year. As you can see, our sanctuary, save for those of us involved in presenting this service, is empty. Of course. For we are observing the requirement that any time two or three are gathered together in Jesus name, or for that matter any other name, we are not to exceed ten in number. And beyond that, we are also supposed to be observing social distancing, keeping at least than six feet apart--and we are. We have no interest in spreading the corona virus. And while I do believe in divine healing, I also believe that most often, God's healing power comes in and through our use of our God given minds to follow rational courses of action. So here we are--and there you are. Bound together over distances ranging from a few blocks to thousands of miles. For, as the old song says, "the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."

Not only is our service this morning markedly different form Palm Sunday services of the past here on Sanibel, it is also markedly different from the events that inspired it. For on that first Palm Sunday, there were no stay-at-home orders, though Jesus probably would have been safer if he had stayed in Nazareth--or even his home away from home Capernaum. Nor was there any effort to enforce social distancing. Quite the opposite. The Passover crowds that were pouring into Jerusalem would have been cheek-by-jowl. Rubbing up against each other as they made their way down the crowded streets.

It all began outside the city walls, as Jesus on the Mount of Olives, instructed his disciples to go into the city and find the house where another of his followers waited with a donkey tethered to a tree. Matthew writes, "and her colt" --but he most likely misunderstood the story, and the other three Gospel writers all tell of a lone donkey without any colt. Whatever, it all seems to have been prearranged, and the disciples are instructed to untie the donkey and bring it to Jesus, and if they are challenged to say, "The Lord has need of it." Sort of a secret password, if you will. Assuring the owner that they weren't donkey thieves, but rather fellow followers of Jesus, just doing what he asked.

And that's just what they do--and soon, the donkey stands in front of Jesus and is covered with his disciples' cloaks--a makeshift saddle, if you will. And then, says Matthew, they are accompanied on the road into Jerusalem by a group of Passover pilgrims. Perhaps they are inspired by their memories of a passage in in the book of Zechariah that promised a conquering Messiah would come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. They start to wave palm

branches, even throwing them on the road in front of Jesus. They shout and sing. "Hosanna!" It means, "He saves!" "Hosanna to the son of David!" The Messiah was to be a descendent of the greatest king Israel had ever known, King David. "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When Jesus finally goes through the gate of the city, everyone, says Matthew, was all riled up. "The whole city was in turmoil." No doubt a bit of exaggeration, but still, he makes his point. Folks were stirred up! "Who is this?" they ask. And his followers answer quickly: "The prophet Jesus! He comes from Nazareth in Galilee!" But Jesus remains quiet, making no claims for himself, simply loving his followers, as foolish and misguided as they often are. Winning them over with love and a generous spirit.

All this, of course, in stark contrast to what is going on at the city gate on the opposite side of Jerusalem, as Pontius Pilate returns from his house on the Palestinian shore, to occupy Jerusalem with his troops during Passover. Somebody needs to keep the unruly Jews in line, says Rome, and that is your job of the Governor. That's your job, Pilate. So even though he hates Jerusalem, and despises its inhabitants, he shows up. With row after row of Roman soldiers. With flags flying, shields and armor rattling, mounted on a war horse, a great white stallion. Make no mistake, his entry says, Rome is in charge! I am in control. And I will use whatever violent means I have at my disposal to make sure you don't forget it!

Quite a contrast, no? In a sense both Jesus and Pilate are marching to Zion, but in such different ways. Jesus is humble, riding on a donkey--Pilate is proud, astride his stallion. Pilate makes all manner of claims for himself and for Rome, Jesus bravely enters the very city where he intuitively understands he will meet his fate. He makes no claims. And in a few short days, the one on the white stallion, will order the execution of the one on the back of a donkey.

What Palm Sunday offers us is a choice. How is it we will move through life? How will we live in times when things are good, when the health of the nation seems to be whole, when the stock market reaches record heights, and how will we live in times, like these, when disease and pandemic threaten so many, and the economy seems to be falling apart at the seams. Will we be like Pilate, ruled by pride and self-interest, or will be like Jesus, ruled by love and concern for others?

The words of that favorite Palm Sunday hymn I spoke of earlier, "All Glory, Laud and Honor," were written by a ninth century bishop named Theodulph. He was a follower of Jesus who moved through life with a real measure of the Master's humility, even though as a bishop in the Middle Ages he had a great deal of power.

Theodulph lived in the time of Charlemagne and was born sometime around 750 CE. He was from Spain, and fled his native home when the Moors invaded. He landed in Aquitaine in Gaul, modern-day France. He joined a monastery there, and in time made a trip to Rome. The city's schools and libraries inspired the young monk, so much so that he wrote many letters to monastic leaders throughout the area, and urged them to create schools for the public.

In time he was elevated to the role of Bishop, in Orleans. With the power he now had, he himself established many such schools in his diocese, public schools, not merely for the elite. He was a writer of poetry as well as theology, and was deeply involved in translating the scriptures from their original languages. But he was not merely an academic, for he cared for the poorest of folk, and once said that anyone who welcomed a poor man to his table, would be welcomed at God's great table in the eternal realm.

When Theodulph's benefactor Charlemagne died in 814, his son, Louis the Pious rose to the throne of the Frankish Empire. But Italy wished for its independence, wanted to break away from the Empire, and so a revolt was launched by the Italian King, Bernard. Though he eventually surrendered, Bernard was still severely punished for the uprising and was sentenced to lose his sight by violent means. He died. Meanwhile, Louis sought out all those who he felt were aligned with Bernard, and Theodulph was accused of treason. He was removed from his position as bishop, and sentenced to be confined to his cell in a monastery. It was there that it is said he wrote in Latin his most famous poem, "Gloria, Laus et honor" -- "All Glory, Laud and Honor." The legend says that one day, as he stood at the window of his monastic cell, he was singing that very poem to the music of his heart, when the Louis came riding by with his retinue. Upon hearing the music, and seeing Theodulph, he realized his mistake in imprisoning him, and ordered him released. Theodulph died a year later, but his story lives on and his poem is an enduring part of Palm Sunday celebrations around the world. Like the humble Jesus, Theodulph's love for God and his love for others came shining through. And no prison could contain his song, his goodness, his love. No more than the tomb in which Jesus would be laid after his crucifixion, could hold back his love.

This time of pandemic, what with school closings, and stay at home orders, and restrictions on so many aspects of our lives, may feel to you like imprisonment. But we have the choice that confronted Jesus, that confronted Theodulph, that confronts all followers of Jesus: will we be like Pilate, will we be ruled by pride and self-interest, or will we be like the one we hail on this Palm Sunday? Will we be like Louis the Pious and allow ego to dictate our actions, or will we be like Theodulph, and allow our very selves to be ruled by the love of God and out of concern for others?

**Will we selfishly refuse to practice social distancing and put others at risk? Will we hoard supplies, and deny others the basic things they need to protect themselves? Will we run out and buy a gun for the first time like the record number of people who did this month here in Florida?**

**We can act selfishly, driven by fear or, we can be like the courageous healthcare workers and first responders who are putting their very lives on the line to protect us. Even if we cannot play such a critical role in this crisis, we can still make the choice to act in love. We can be like some of our church folks, led by Jo Hardy and Mike Raab of Temple Bat Yam, have volunteered to deliver groceries to those who are literally imprisoned in their homes, the frightened, the sick, the very old. We can be like Milissa Sprecher, her children, Betsy Foreman and Linda Convertine who have turned their confinement into masks, many masks, for healthcare workers and others. We can be like young Henry Crater, who has found his way to his dock, to sing for his shut-in neighbors. They have all chosen to follow the way of Jesus. The way of love and care for others.**

**On this Palm Sunday, when so much is different, one thing remains the same. We have a choice. So, whose way will you follow? That of Pilate or, or that of Jesus? That of Louis or that of Theodulph? The choice, as always, is yours. And though this is a very different Palm Sunday, you are still asked how, how my friend, will you march into Zion?**

**Amen**

**John H. Danner**