

The Palm Sunday Parade
(or, “Will YOU Let God Come In?”)

Psalm 24

Matthew 21:1-11

March 16, 2008 – Palm Sunday

Oakland Avenue PCUSA

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Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

- 1 *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*
 (Zechariah 9:9) 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.”*

Today’s sermon is made-up of three vignettes or sketches and two stories.

VIGNETTE #1

On one of the many television news programs, they were interviewing a professor of political science from a nearby university concerning the state of the world. This particular topic had to do with the hatred and unrest in the middle eastern part of the world between various religious groups and why fundamentalist Muslim groups would want to kill Americans through various terrorist actions. The professor of political science responded with this comment:

“We must understand that fundamentalist Muslims see the United States of America as a nation of evil and darkness because the United States is not a religious nation.”

VIGNETTE #2

In my years as Pastor of the Fort Hill PCUSA in Clemson, it was normal that annually I took a group from the church to Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta for a gathering

known as “*The Columbia Friendship Circle.*” No doubt some of you in Oakland Avenue PCUSA have attended such events.

On this particular trip, one of the highlights of the meeting was hearing the stories, or “personal testimony” as one student put it, of the students at Columbia Seminary who were there on scholarships from The Columbia Friendship Circle.

As I sat and listened to story after story of how God was working in the lives of those students, I distinctly remember wondering if the folks who were listening understood that *being a Christian in the United States today means being different from the rest of our neighbors.* Now this is a question that this preacher hopes that you will mull over this next week:

Do you and I really understand and accept the fact
that being a Christian makes you different from
the rest of your neighbors here in Rock Hill?

VIGNETTE #3

Perhaps you saw it. It was a video tape entitled “*The Los Altos Story.*” It told the story of a healthy and wealthy community in California that is not unlike our Rock Hill community. Three persons who were connected to the Los Altos Rotary Club in Los Altos, California, got the **AIDS virus**, and the video tells the story of how the Rotary Club in Los Altos handled the situation. It is a retelling of a tragic story which is affecting the future of the United States and the world. The story is so gripping that at its conclusion all one feels like doing is praying to God. How in the world does one face such a tragedy without faith in God!

Three vignettes. Now, two stories.

THE FIRST STORY

The first story comes out of the hymn that we sang a few minutes ago, “**Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates,**” which in turn comes from **Psalm 24** which we read a few minutes ago, which in turn comes from a story that is found in the Old Testament book of **II Samuel**, chapter 6.

It is a story about King David, the second King of Israel, the King who followed King Saul. King David has taken as his capital city, JERUSALEM, and King David has fortified the city to make it even more secure against the attacks of the Philistine army.

In his 8th year as King of Israel, King David decides that he wants to make JERUSALEM not only his capital city but also the center of the religious life of his people. And to do this, King David prepares to bring into the City of David, JERUSALEM, the very holy ARK OF THE COVENANT.

Now, perhaps you recall that the Ark of the Covenant came into being sometime during THE EXODUS of the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of God’s servant, **Moses**. The Ark of the Covenant was a chest of some kind that was built to resemble a type of *throne* in the bottom of which were stored religious items such as the two tablets of stone on which were inscribed the 10 Commandments. Some people even thought that some of God’s MANNA was kept in there!

The Ark of the Covenant symbolized the very presence of YAHWEH GOD whom the Children of Israel worshiped. The Ark of the Covenant was carried with them in the Tabernacle

throughout their forty years of wilderness wanderings, and it was carried with them into The Promised Land. On occasion, it had actually been stolen by the Philistine army with the hope that its absence would make the army of the Children of Israel weak and helpless.

It was this famous, holy ARK OF THE COVENANT which King David wanted to have in his new capital city of Jerusalem.

The second half of Psalm 24 which was read earlier is thought to have been the hymn that King David wrote for the parade by which the ARK OF THE COVENANT was brought into the city of Jerusalem. The hymn that we sang, “*Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates,*” was taken from Psalm 24.

The writer of II Samuel says that the entrance of the ARK OF THE COVENANT into the city of Jerusalem was such a happy, festive time that there was feasting and music and King David himself led the parade and danced with joy in the streets because the symbol of YAHWEH GOD was coming into the city.

Now, this is one thing that I want you to mull over this next week:

DO YOU THINK IT MAKES ANY DIFFERENCE IN ROCK HILL TO HAVE OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, THE SYMBOL OF YAHWEH GOD, SITTING RIGHT HERE IN THIS PLACE IN OUR TOWN?

THE SECOND STORY

Jump with me in your imagination *1,000 years forward* from the time of King David to the time of King Jesus. It is the same city of David, Jerusalem, and the Jewish people were approaching the annual celebration of the greatest festival in their religious and cultural lives: *the Feast of the Passover.*

This particular celebration was the time that all of the Jewish people remembered how God had acted in history in order to bring his chosen people out of slavery in Egypt. And the commemoration centered around the eating of the Passover meal in obedience to their Holy Scriptures, what we Christians refer to as the Old Testament.

(Incidentally, this next Thursday when we gather around the Holy Table [and I am praying that YOU will be there], we gather in remembrance of Jesus’ celebration of the Passover meal in that famous Upper Room just before Jesus was betrayed and crucified.)

At any rate, once again the Festival of the Passover was approaching and the city of Jerusalem was thronged with crowds of people. There was a spirit of rejoicing and gaiety in the air as children romped and dogs barked in the excitement. Men and women, young and old, lined the streets quickly because someone had shouted out that there was a parade coming.

Necks stretched and people stood on tip-toe in order to see.....but there turned out not to be very much to see! In fact, it was sort of disappointing, for there was very little to the parade!

All there was to the parade was one man riding on a donkey surrounded by a rather large group of his friends, so it seemed, all shouting and waving their arms. Some of them were even taking off their cloaks and throwing them on the street so that the donkey could walk on them! Others in the crowd were throwing large palm fronds on the streets along with the cloaks.

Some WAG in the crowd said that they seemed to be treating this teacher as if he were a king, for their method of salute and their way of welcome was such as was usually reserved for royalty.

And then the shouts of the crowd around the man became audible:

they were hailing him as a king!

Jesus was **the kind of person whom children loved** and who loved children and who exhibited a love of life.

THAT IS WHAT GOD IS LIKE.

Jesus was **the One who was betrayed and was crucified, dead, buried, and who overcame death and the grave.**

THAT IS WHAT GOD IS LIKE.

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This morning I have told you two stories, both of which center in a parade into the city of Jerusalem. Now, listen to this **simile** which is an **analogy**:

**YOU AND I ARE LIKE THE CITY OF JERUSALEM.
THE QUESTION IS: “WILL YOU LET GOD COME IN?”**

Consider *VIGNETTE #1* where the university professor of political science remarked that the United States is not a religious nation.

If you let God in,
will it make any difference?

Consider *VIGNETTE #2* in which the seminary students told what a change God had made in their lives.

If you let God in,
will it make any difference?

Consider *VIGNETTE #3* in which a family faced the death of a son through the AIDS virus.

If you let God in,
will it make any difference?

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome and in Rock Hill:

***“For I am sure that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from
the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***
(Romans 8:38)

Do you believe that?

Do you really believe that?

Then, why are you anxious?

I hope that you will mull that over this next week.