

Joy Dances Down!

The Celebration of Palm Sunday

Text: Zechariah 4: 9: 9-10; Mark 11:1-10

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*Joy dances down the street, grabbing us by the hand,
twirling us round and round as glad tears and songs
make a carpet of welcome for the One who comes.¹*

Shout-outs of anticipated triumph . . . ripple and rise with splashes of hope. They evoke somersaults of promise and the foretaste that something very good is just around the next corner. And, echoed in the poet's verse just moments ago: "glad tears and songs make a carpet of welcome for the One who comes."

I discovered a new word about that carpet of welcome, in what has long been called, the first movement of Palm Sunday: the parade, the energy of celebration, and the cheering innocence, as Jesus made his way on that day we recall, in the early thirties of the first century.

The word is alfombra. It's from a tradition in the Latino community where a colleague of mine is a pastor.² "On Palm Sunday," he writes, "the kids skip Sunday School for a beautiful reason. They break clear out of the confines of the church building and head right out to the open street. And why not? That's where they expect Jesus will be."

"Waiting on the sidewalk is a huge spread of pedals, leafy branches and boughs – all provided by the florists the city. The kids weave them into an alfombra, or carpet, that marks a pathway of pure joy for the One whom they awaited. The day could not be, would not be, ready for Jesus if they did not embark this practice. And their alfombra lines their Syracuse neighborhood, as their adult counterparts recess from worship, out into the street."

"Hosanna!" they shout. "Blessed!" they chant. We all know the sounds! And, in an even more ancient expression from the Old Testament, they strain to hear Zechariah's echo: "Rejoice greatly! Your king comes to you, victorious, humble, and riding on a donkey!"

And so, movement one to our narrative, if you will: the procession, the parade, the cheers, the crowd. Of course, Jesus understood more than anyone else that day, how quickly the winds would shift from alfombra to something much darker. But still, for now, this innocent glimpse before that shift commands the moment.

That's precisely where and how . . . Palm Sunday began. It's a necessary element to the day. It's not pretend or make-believe or merely children at play. It was real. It's an

expression of what theologian Paul Ricour called our first naïveté, a pre-critical look at the pageantry and procession that is a part of our collective memory of the day.

But we misrepresent what lies beneath if we stop the procession quite yet; because it did not take long for tensions to begin to rise - and there were more and mighty and plenty of them. So, the second movement of Palm Sunday, if I might call it that, is an awareness to a wider truth unfolding.

Because, on that very same day, another procession was going on as well. The one we imagine features Jesus as he rode down from the east descending the slopes of the Mount of Olives. The other procession entered from the opposite side of Jerusalem through the gates of power.

In the simplest explanation, a clash of culture and perspective, of wealth and privilege, of dominion and power were on the cusp. Donkey-clad Jesus on the one side, an ancient eastern symbol of peace; as those on the other on horseback, just as ancient as a symbol, but of battle.

The cauldron set in the heart of that city was heating up to boil. Jesus knew this – he was anything but naïve. And the Calvary of the Roman Guard knew it too. It was the mix and match of authority from below and that from above; a juxtaposition of the power of love on the one hand and the love of power on the other.

Honestly, the essence of Palm Sunday was caught in the thick of that swirl. We do ourselves a disservice, let alone Jesus, if we favor one of those glimpses over the other - the welcome alfombra carpet over the rising clash - or the other way around. And history reveals that these have not often be held in thoughtful balance.

But still let's not stop yet. We short-change the deepest part of it all if we end too soon. Orson Wells once said, "The ending is almost always dependent on where we stop telling the story."³ So hang in there for one more pause along the way with this.

The story is simply too big, too beautiful, too frightening, too hopeful – with all that happened that first Holy Week. And to reach for premature closure or untested conclusions too early offends the deeper pull.

Remember, God was at work in all of this, too! It wasn't just about a parade or the kind of shifting psychology that haunts the world still. No. Jesus had a trust in God that was inseparable from all that was happening. And, though it was the hardest week of his life, he was not about to let go of that. "Abba", his heavenly parent, was doing something in and through Jesus, and that's where our wondering should best land us.

One of my favorite poets these days is Carrie Newcomer. She wrote about a parent helping a child to face the fact that there are hard things that come to pass in life, but by

the grace of some power beyond our own, we can do hard things. The child was trying to learn complicated math – which for some of us is a pretty hard thing!

*There at the table
with my head in my hands,
a column of numbers
I just did not understand.
You said add these together
carry the two, now you -
you can do this hard thing
you can do this hard thing
it's not easy I know
but I believe that its so.
You can do this hard thing.⁴*

Beautiful words! Hope speaking through! And the hard thing that was going on that Holy Week - and that goes on every week of our lives – is our will to hear the deeper call of the Gospel - which asks very hard things of all of us; and to believe, despite all appearances, in the relevance of love's promise, and the true-blue vision of God's realm.

Jesus did this hard thing. Jesus dared the deeper truth. And so for us to look beyond ourselves for what God is doing or trying to do; to trust even when we do not fully get it; God is still up to something more and beyond in Jesus this week. Because God so loved, still loves, always will love the world.

So pray on these things . . . this Holy Week with me. Because I do believe that somewhere . . . between the alfombra moment of cheering delight . . . the awareness of shadows and tensions growing . . . and the fact that God is doing something through it all is the Word of truth for today. For Jesus. For you. For me. And for all of us.

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! Amen!

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¹ Thomas Schuman. Wild Goose Big Book of Worship Resources. Wild Good Publications, 2017, pp 77-79.

² Quinn G Caldwell. "Alfombra!" in the Still Speaking Writers Devotional. April 9, 2017.

³ Anne Lamott. Hallelujah Anyway. Riverhead Books, 2017, p. 95.

⁴ Carrie Newcomer. The Beautiful Not Yet. Available Light Publishing, 2016, pp. 98-100.