

Message: Who Will You Invite?**Who likes parades?**

We all do. There’s a famous parade each year in Pasadena, the Rose Parade. Has anyone gone to it? [*show of hands*] What did you think? It’s an amazing experience, isn’t it? The floats are works of art. The bands lift your spirits. There are people on horseback, special guests and more. There’s something for everyone. I used to live in Pasadena, three blocks south of Colorado Avenue, so I’d get up early, take coffee and watch the parade from a street corner. Then I’d go home and talk about the best parts with friends and family. I think that’s a lot like what happened when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first “palm day.” It makes me wonder, though.

What would be the modern day equivalent of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem? Here are two ways. The first is the 4th of July parade down Main Street in Corona. The crowd’s friends and family, neighbors, city officials, visitors and others. The second way is the Rose Parade, Macy’s Day parade or Mardi Gras. The crowds are much larger and there’s a national and international television audience. Now, in both cases, there’s one, big difference. Instead of getting excited about floats, bands, displays or animals, the crowd would be cheering one, single person. A man dressed simply, riding in a nice, but not too expensive, car with the top down. His entourage would be going ahead of him, clearing the way. And it’s an impromptu parade, so people would have to pull off the road because the crowd fills the street. Here’s an idea: maybe Jesus’ entry was like both, a battle of the parades?

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is an important sign. The people of his day and time “got it.” After all, they were in town for the most important national holiday. They’re planning to attend the biggest, fanciest Jewish church that existed. There are plans for a special family meal later in the week. This is something they’d been doing all their lives with memories that went back more than a thousand years. Seeing Jesus riding on the back of a donkey with people waving palm branches and throwing their coats on the street is the equivalent of someone walking in front of Jesus with a big, neon sign: “The king is coming!”

The streets, homes and public places would be filled with excited people. The country was waiting for a king to unite the political, military, judicial and religious branches of their government. Anyone who could do so would give them hope: they might be free from the Romans who’d occupied their country for 160 years, taxing them heavily. Jesus’ entry into the city of Jerusalem was the hot topic of conversation everywhere in the city. The people of Jerusalem “got it.”

There’s one thing that’s easy to miss. Matthew 21:8-11 says, *“A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!’ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee’”* (my emphasis).

Do you hear it? The people in the crowds all responded. The question is: how? There’s the very large crowd who put their coats and palm branches on the road. They went ahead to clear the way shouting “Hosanna” as they followed along, calling Jesus blessed. “Hosanna” means “Save us!” Their very words were a call for God to free them, take away their burdens and give them hope for the future. The first crowd probably came from Galilee. They knew Jesus. They’d heard the good news he shared. They’d seen his miracles and they were filled with joy. Jesus was finally giving everyone a clear sign of his identity. Jesus is the king! He’s the promised Messiah, come to save them.

Then there’s the second crowd. They’re the people who live in Jerusalem or who are from other parts of the country. Scholars have estimated the population of Jerusalem to be 30-35,000 people on a regular week. During Passover, almost 100,000 additional people would come to town for the week. Some of those people may have heard of Jesus, but they wouldn’t know him and wouldn’t know all the amazing stories. A large parade with a man making such a dramatic statement would turn things upside down in the city. They know what the signs mean, but they don’t know what to think of it or what to do.

My question is this: do we “get it” today? What do you think when you hear the story? Does it fill your head with questions or ‘what if’ scenarios? Maybe you’re thinking: who knows if it happened? Even if it did, that was almost 2,000 years ago. So what? Does your head get in the way? Or does your heart jump when you hear Jesus’ story? When you let God’s Spirit work in your heart and mind, you’ll want to shout “Hosanna” – “Save me!”, no matter what your concerns are. The message of a simple, humble man riding into a city to face the hate, anger and darkness he knows lies ahead gives us hope. Jesus’ simple act fills us with courage and hope. We hear Jesus’ call to follow and join the parade!

Do you see and hear the message “the king’s coming”? We may have lost our enthusiasm and excitement through repetition, holding too tightly to traditions, or focusing on the business and institution of the church. The antidote is to seek God in our daily life. Join the parade following Jesus! That’s the way to grow spiritually and to be filled with a passion and energy for life. As we travel with others on a spiritual journey, we’ll learn more about our Lord. I can’t think of a better way to live. I invite you to join. It’s an amazing journey. It’s the way of radical love. It’s the way to change the world.

Which crowd do you belong to? Are you a follower? Do you go ahead, telling others about who’s coming or follow along, praising Jesus’ name? Do you invite others to join the crowd? After all, that’s what it means to be a follower of Christ. Are our hearts filled with hope, love and joy? Are we excited to share what we know deep down in our soul with others, no matter who they are or whether they respond or not?

Or are we part of the crowd who doesn’t know what to think or what to do? We’ll go along because everyone else is, but this whole “Jesus thing” is inconvenient, makes us uncomfortable and, frankly, we’d rather get on with our lives. It’s all kind of messy. The idea of inviting someone else just doesn’t appeal. If you feel that way - hesitant, unsure or even bothered, I want you to know one thing: Jesus loves you. You’re welcome here. We’ve all been there. You’re welcome wherever you are on your spiritual journey. The doors are open and the parade

can be joined, anytime. Don't give up. We believe in you. Most importantly, God believes in you!

Earlier, I suggested a new way to think about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem: it's the story of two crowds - two parades, colliding at the gates. One crowd knows Jesus and wants to tell others the reason they have faith, hope and love. The other crowd wants to know more, but they're unsure. They need an invitation first. Only then can they decide whether they're ready to accept it.

Who will you invite to learn more about Jesus? I ask you to invite someone to come and join us as we travel through the rest of this week and in the seasons of life to follow.

'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'
Save us, Lord

Experience is the best teacher, so I invite you to join me in the spiritual practice of breath prayer. It's a quick way to invite God's Spirit to be with us, particularly during difficult moments.

[*spiritual exercise – see breath prayer guide*]

Gracious God, we thank you for opening our hearts and minds in a new way this morning. We lift you up with shouts of praise as we follow in your parade. Lead us through life and to eternal life in heaven. In Jesus' name, amen.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (NRSV)

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “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.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”