

A TALE OF TWO PARADES

Matthew 21:1-11

Luke 23:26-33

*Whether the crowd is cheering or jeering,
the journey is worthwhile.*

A sermon preached by
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I love a good parade. When I was in high school, I got to see the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York City, the granddaddy of them all. I still watch it on TV every Thanksgiving. I have seen the wonderful displays of lights and floats at the nighttime parades in Disneyland and Disney World. And when I lived in Hot Springs, they had what they called the World's Shortest St. Patrick's Day Parade. On a street that is only 98 feet long, you get to see hometown floats, bagpipes from Lyon College, has-been celebrity grand marshals, and the International Order of Irish Elvi—Elvis impersonators all decked out for St. Patrick's Day.¹ I love a fun parade!

Not every parade, of course, is that much fun. In 1991, the Persian Gulf War had just broken out. I lived in Lake Village at the time, and the local Army Reserve unit was called up. Nearly the whole town lined the highway as the convoy made a long green parade going off to war. It was the first time that had happened since the Vietnam War. As I stood there with my family, I waved to the soldiers, and I saw their families standing beside us on the roadside. Everyone was waving flags and cheering and crying. I felt the most incredible mixture of emotions—pride and thankfulness for our country and our soldiers, pain and sorrow for their families, sort of a mixture of patriotism and pacifism. I knew some of the soldiers—who were also husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and grandsons—might never come home. It was a different kind of parade.

I experience a similar mixture of emotions as we enter Holy Week, the eight days starting on Palm Sunday and ending on Easter. What a roller coaster ride this was for Jesus! The crowds who shouted "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday were screaming "Crucify him!" by Friday. The coronation of the King became the crucifixion of a criminal. I feel the pride and the joy and the celebration of the Triumphal Entry and the sorrow and the horror and the humiliation of Calvary.

I think we can see the mixture of things going on during Holy Week by looking at the two parades that Jesus leads. In both processions, Jesus was the whole show; in both he was the center of attention. But how different they were!

When Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, there was an orchestrated demonstration on his behalf. The twelve disciples and other followers wanted everyone to know that Jesus had arrived. The symbolism of the ride into town was a calculated political and religious statement. Such an entry into Jerusalem had been predicted by the prophet Zechariah. The Messiah, the new King of Israel, would come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, triumphant and victorious, yet humble and peace-loving. For Jesus to ride in as Zechariah predicted was to say two things: Here is the new King, and he comes in peace.

But peace was not what he found. By the end of the week, the adulation of the crowds had turned to scorn and derision and hatred. Jesus had been arrested without charges, convicted in a prejudiced court, sentenced to die in a political compromise. He had been beaten within an inch of his life and then forced to carry a heavy timber on his bloody back to his own execution. Even when they compelled another man to carry the beam for the cross, Jesus knew that every step brought him closer to the most torturous death ever devised by sinners. The few women who were still faithful were following behind, weeping and wailing. The last moments of Jesus were spent suffocating between two criminals.

Yet through it all, Jesus never wavered. He rode into town astride the donkey, knowing that he was courting death. On he went, because it was his date with destiny. On the *via dolorosa*, the way of sorrows, he kept putting one foot in front of the other until he finally lay down at Golgotha, and they nailed him to the cross. But he never quit. It was the will of God and the will of Jesus to do what he was doing. It was a sacrifice he was willing to make because of his great love. He knew the purpose, and he finished the journey. It didn't really matter whether the crowd was cheering or jeering; Jesus did his job. He completed his mission. He saved the world.

Let me share with you today three insights that I think made the journey of Jesus complete. I believe that if we walk his way, our journey can be complete and meaningful and productive, too, whether the crowd is cheering or jeering.

First, when the journey is pleasant, **enjoy the ride**. Some days are like the Palm Sunday parade. Everything is going your way. Everybody loves you. Every problem is surmountable, and every task is doable. The sun is shining; you feel good; and it's great to be alive! When you have a day like that, don't worry about when it's all going to come crashing down. Just enjoy the ride.

Jesus knew the Palm Sunday thing would not last, but I think he really savored the moment. In Luke's version of the parade, the Pharisees rebuked Jesus and told him to make everyone stop shouting praise. Jesus replied, "If I made the people be quiet, the very stones would shout!"

Most of the time, life is such a pleasant experience; enjoy the ride. Don't take yourself so seriously. God never intended his faithful people to be all serious and sour-faced and mournful and "religious" all the time. Most of the time, life is supposed to be fun! Don't borrow trouble from tomorrow to make today miserable. As the old cowboys used to say, "Sit loosely in the saddle of life." Enjoy the ride.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to help out a church member. She had just bought a brand-new Mercedes-Benz convertible. She was going out of town for a couple

of weeks, and she asked me if I would car-sit for her. It was springtime, and she didn't want her car just to sit in her garage during all the glorious spring weather. Being the humble servant of Jesus that I am, I accepted this call to service. I had to explain several times why the preacher was driving around in a Mercedes convertible, but it was worth it. Since we're still in the Lenten season, I will make this confession: I had a really good time driving that sports car! I don't know what those things cost, but they're worth every penny. The really great thing is, I got to have my mid-life crisis for free, driving around in a borrowed sports car without having to buy one!

Some days are like clunking down a gravel road in a rusty 1973 Volkswagen, but some days are like zooming down the interstate in a brand new Mercedes with the top down, and nobody's cooler than you! When you have a day like that, it's a gift. Thank God for it. They won't all be that way.

When the journey is pleasant, enjoy the ride. When the road gets rough, **endure the pain**. It's not all sunshine and sports cars. Sometimes you're carrying the cross, the crowd is cursing you, and every step is an effort. Death would be a blessing, if it weren't so painful.

Dr. Morrie Schwartz was the college professor described by sportswriter Mitch Albom in his book *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Morrie was afflicted with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, a gradual and incurable deterioration of all muscular systems. Mitch recorded their conversations as the disease took its toll on his old teacher. One day Mitch asked Morrie why he kept up with the news of the world, since he wasn't going to be around much longer. Why should he care? Morrie responded, "It's hard to explain, Mitch. Now that I'm suffering I feel closer to people who suffer than I ever did before. The other night on TV I saw people ... running across the street, getting fired on, killed, innocent victims...and I just started to cry. I feel their anguish as if it were my own. I don't know any of these people. But—how can I put this?—I'm almost drawn to them."²

For people of faith, pain is not the enemy. Sin is the enemy. Pain is part of life, and it can be used to draw us closer to God, to strengthen our spirits, or to unlock in us a powerful, Christ-like compassion for others who are hurting. Jesus loved life, but he did not turn his face away from pain and death just because it was unpleasant. He endured the pain to save the world. He himself suffered, so he knows what we're going through. Relying on the grace of Christ, we can endure our own pain, and learn from it, and use it to overcome our difficulties—even to glorify God through it.

David Ring is a Christian evangelist who has had to overcome incredible suffering in his own life. Born with cerebral palsy, he has a speech impediment so severe you can hardly understand him. But his message of Christ's love and the courage of his faith come through loud and clear. Depending on God, David Ring has done far more than his doctors ever imagined he could. Speaking before 11,000 people in an arena, David said, "They said I would never ride a bike, but I did. They said I would never get married, but I have [a wife and four children]. They said I would never preach, but last year I preached 265 times." Then David Ring issued his trademark challenge, "I have cerebral palsy. What's your problem?"³

We all have problems. We all have pains. But we can all have Jesus, who endured his pain on the cross, so that we could endure our trials in life, and so we can overcome our challenges.

When the journey is pleasant, enjoy the ride. When the road is rough, endure the pain. And always keep your **eye on the prize**. Jesus was able to complete his journey because he knew the goal. His head was not turned by the adoration of the crowd on Palm Sunday, and his feet were not stopped by the weight of the cross on Good Friday. He was a man on a mission, and everything was focused on its successful completion. He had his eyes on the prize.

If we're going to complete the journey, if we expect to finish well, we have to keep our eyes on the prize. As Paul put it in Philippians, "*This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*"⁴ Whatever is happening around you, whether the crowd is cheering or jeering, no matter what your external circumstances are, look forward, press on, and keep your eyes on the prize of heaven.

Years ago, there was a big Vietnam veterans' parade in Chicago. Part of the commemoration was a mobile version of the Vietnam Wall. Like the original wall in Washington, D.C., it bore the names of all the soldiers who had died in the Vietnam war. A newscaster was interviewing people and found a guy who had come some distance to be there. She asked why he had come all the way to Chicago to visit this memorial and to participate in the parade. The soldier looked straight into the face of the reporter, and with tears flowing down his cheeks said, "Because of this man right here." As the veteran talked, he was pointing to the name of a friend that was etched in the wall. He traced the letters of his friend's name in the wall, over and over. The soldier continued to answer the reporter, "This man right here gave his life for me." He repeated, "He gave his life for me." The reporter stood speechless as the soldier let the tears flow, while he stood there tracing the name of his friend with his finger.⁵

Every year we retrace the steps of Jesus—into the city on Palm Sunday, to the upper room for the Last Supper, to the court of the high priest, then to Pilate, down the *via dolorosa* to the hill called Golgotha—because we cannot escape this truth. He gave his life for me and you.

I want to invite you to this parade today. In a moment you will come forward and receive Holy Communion. In one sense, it's a parade of joy, because we know the end of the story, and we celebrate the presence of Christ with us today. But in another sense, it's a parade of sorrow, because we retrace the tragic story of the extravagant love of Jesus. In the face of betrayal and injustice and death, he knelt and washed the disciples' feet and fed them. That's just incredible. That's what makes him the Savior, and that's what makes our journey worthwhile.

¹ <https://shortteststpats.com/>.

² Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays With Morrie* (N. Y.: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 50f.

³ R. L. Russell, "Triumphing Over Trials," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 119.

⁴ Philippians 3:13f.

⁵ Lee Eclov, in the sermon "Blasphemy!" *PreachingToday.com*.