

A Step Towards Joy

March 28, 2010, Palm Sunday
Luke 19: 29 – 40

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From the outset, let me confess that talking about joy is a lot like analyzing what makes jokes funny. But I'm convinced that God has something to say to us about joy this Palm Sunday. Who can deny the joy of the disciples shouting out "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" as they travel down the mountain into Jerusalem. Who cannot see the Sanhedrin as killjoys as they demand Jesus stop the celebration?

Joy is a Christmas word, a word which connotes wonder and light. When I hear the word joy in worship, I expect to see the baby Jesus surrounded by that holy light. We are used to the pictures of people, animals, and angels gazing upon his face. No one painted in that scene can turn away. Tidings of Comfort and Joy!

From the beginning of the Christian story, from the outset of our Christian life, we are given a picture of joy which is not dependant on our surroundings as the manger is not a well appointed home. We understand that joy is not dependent on our intelligence or success. Shepherds and wise men alike are invited to come and see Jesus. Joy to the World the Lord is Come!

From today's children's time: "He comes, he comes, he comes in the name of the Lord."

Do you see? Palm Sunday is like Christmas. Remember from Luke 2: 13...And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Luke 19:38 echoes that scripture: Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven.

The people coming down from the Mount of Olives have taken the place of the angels, announcing the arrival of Jesus. In this scene, earth is not so far from heaven. Heaven is not so far from earth. The Lord is come, joy!

Each week we begin worship, the spoken word, with an angel like announcement, often from scripture itself, calling us to Palm Sunday like celebration. God is here, right now, in this place. Let us sing! God created the church in order that God might regularly break through the veil separating him from his beloved people. That's why so many people experience tears in church. The tears come from a place of deep joy because God has reached you. Joy is found when God breaks into our lives.

Do you believe that? Joy is found when God breaks into our lives. Not happiness, not success, not victory...God.

John Ortberg, from the Willow Creek Church in Chicago tells the story of his once little three children. When his family went out to eat, there was only one place the children ever wanted to go, the shrine of the golden arches. His children seem to be convinced that they had a McDonald's-shaped vacuum in their souls. It's a combination of the food -- about which they really don't much care -- and a little prize. It's not much of a prize, really, just some cheap little plastic thing, but in a moment of marketing genius, the folks at McDonald's gave it a particular name. They call it the Happy Meal. It is the meal of great joy. You aren't just buying chicken McNuggets and a plastic meatball that answers your "yes or no" questions, you're buying happiness.

Every now and then Ortberg tried to talk them out of it, tried to teach them basic economics. If he doesn't buy them a happy meal, he will give them a quarter so they can buy their own trinket and everyone will come out ahead. Really, it should have been a dollar...works with Rachel. But the chant goes up, We want a Happy Meal. We want a Happy Meal. Other customers stare at this cheapskate of a father who won't buy his kids the meal of great joy.

So, he buys them the Happy Meal. And it makes them happy for about a minute and a half. That seems about right. The problem is that the happy wears off. The contentment doesn't last. You've never heard of a young adult coming back to his parents and saying, Gee, Dad, remember that Happy Meal you gave me? That's where I found lasting contentment and lifelong joy. I knew if I could just have that Happy Meal, I would be content for a lifetime, and I am. Thank you. There'll be no need for therapy for this boy.

Ortberg sums up: You would think, kids being fairly bright these days, that sooner or later they would catch on to this deal and say, You know, I keep getting these Happy Meals and they don't give me lasting happiness, so I'm not going to be a sucker any more. I'm not going to set myself up for frustration and disappointment any more. But it never happens. They keep buying Happy Meals and they keep not working.

Of course, only a child would be so foolish.

It's not just that our adult Happy Meals seem to keep getting more expensive. It's their ever-morphing, ever-elusive character.

The kids were right about the need if not the strategy to meet it. There is a strangely shaped hole in our hearts. It has everything to do with joy.

When our heavenly father breaks into our lives, we know joy. A step towards joy, then, is a step that leads us towards God, opens the door that God may come in. Palm Sunday's celebration begins with a simple act of obedience.

Jesus says to two unnamed disciples go into the village, find the colt which has never been ridden, say "the Lord needs it," and return. And scripture reports... "So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, 'Why are you untying the colt?' They said, 'The Lord needs it.' Then they brought it to Jesus.

Whenever disciples are unnamed it is the gospel's invitation for each of us to enter into the story. When I do, I can't help but think I may not have been so ready to obey. This act of obedience seems extraordinarily unnecessary. The multitude of disciples could have thrown down their cloaks as Jesus walked into Jerusalem or perhaps somebody in the throng had a colt Jesus could borrow for the day. But Jesus had other plans.

Okay, it is true the Palm procession re-enacts a prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter

Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

He will cut off the chariot

from Ephraim

and the war horse

from Jerusalem.

And the battle bow shall be cut

Off,

And he shall command peace to the nations;

His dominion shall be from sea

To sea,

And from the River to the ends of the earth."

The disciples probably knew the prophecy. They had that advantage over me. But still there is a remarkable lack of questioning that occurs. Not even the ones who own the colt who is being taken from them can form a valid argument against "The Lord needs it." I guess it isn't wise to argue with a king.

Lo your king comes to you. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!

The Pharisees would have us believe otherwise. "Teacher, order your disciples..." Teacher.

I know in our time and place we often have more respect for teachers who inspire souls to great acts of courage than we do for those crowned kings through blood lines of relatives or the blood of the opposition who require unquestioning obedience. Jesus is no earthly king. Jesus does not seek to rule armies. He doesn't seek the power of the empire.

So why not allow Jesus to simply be a teacher? Doesn't he have disciples? Doesn't he teach us about God? Are not the gospels a collection of Jesus' wise teachings? If we follow in the master teacher's way, won't we find God, won't we find joy?

Probably you'll find something for awhile. I get as excited as most about being in the presence of a great teacher. But note the Pharisees, those who call Jesus "teacher," are not able to enter into the joyful celebration. They, who are called to bridge the distance between God and the Jews, actually try to stop the joyful praise of God. And notice one more detail, in this scene, it is the praise of God which reveals the presence of the Pharisees within the disciples themselves.

Within the very heart of the movement, at the exact moment when God has broken through, there is, as there often is, that Pharisaical voice of doubt, that voice which seeks to disinherit the king. We are led to question—led to ask, what is the point? Does it really matter? The Pharisee within us, who has its own commitments, roars, Stop. Jesus doesn't need that colt. We don't need this celebration. He's no king. God doesn't need this kind of praise. We know this will end in tragedy anyway...and the Pharisee orders its underground team to get to work. Oh, how strong, how convincing is that voice which turns a people against their God, that voice which steals our joy.

It is those who call Jesus "king" who drown out the Pharisees in a sea of joyful praise. That's why the gospel goes to great lengths to picture Jesus as king, to plant that image firmly in our minds.

1) the disciples unquestioningly obey Jesus' orders

2) The people parade into Jerusalem with Jesus on a colt, mirroring the picture of Zechariah's prophecy.

3) The people take the place of the angels announcing for all to hear... "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord"

Of these we've already spoken.

4) Finally, it is Jesus not the Pharisees, who commands. When the Pharisees tell Jesus to quiet his disciples, he responds in a way that leaves no doubt that he could quiet them. "I tell you, if these were silent," he says, "the stones would shout out." Kind of a slap in the face, don't you think? Even the rocks have more brains than you finely dressed, well spoken, voices of fear.

Jesus continually confronts the Pharisees then and now. He argues, he quips, he orders...but what really undermines a Pharisee's power is obedience to the God of love. The Pharisees would say this journey to the cross makes no earthly sense. And it certainly makes no sense to be celebrating. But you see Jesus moves on God's command despite the questions swirling around him. Jesus is king not because he can make the Pharisees do his will but because God, through him, can reach into your and my life. Jesus through his own obedience calls us to obedience despite our fears, our unknowing. Jesus calls us to take a step towards joy.

How exactly are you to be obedient? Maybe you already know and have been thinking about it all the time I've been speaking, garnering strength for something big. Some of you who are great daydreamers may have dreamed up a challenging leap of faith. Many of you are high achievers so I suspect there are great plans brewing.

Brew away, but let me suggest, that as you stir the pot... you allow time for a few simple acts of obedience. For each step we take diminishes the power of the Pharisees... each step opens the door wider to God.

I've got the absolute best Bible Study in the world. I love these women. They know that they were driving me crazy. Our Monday study starts at 10:00. It had come to pass that one day we finally all arrived by 10:30, having drifted in one by one. That day, in the 15 minutes of study left before share time, we had an animated discussion about what God calls us to do in the world. Greedy to dig deeper, to hear more of God through our conversations, I suggested that we are so worried about what we are to do for those who we do not know and yet we can't even love one another enough to be here on time. Two weeks later that changed. At 10:00 we opened in prayer. The last few weeks have been filled with laughter, love, and joy. You see, because of a small act of obedience, God has broken in...we've seen his power.

I'm wondering, what act of obedience might you commit yourself to today?

During Ducks games in the Honda Center, there used to be a noise meter that would sometimes appear on the Jumbotron. The meter starts out low, and slowly rises a notch at a time as people get louder and louder and louder. It's pretty silly. But here today, I imagine a joy meter. And, as each one of us takes a step to obey, I see the joy meter rising, higher and higher until our voices join with the angels, once again announcing to the world, "He has come."

Before we pray, I want to give you a moment to find a pen or pencil and some paper. Go ahead and do some digging. We're going to write down our homework for the week. Holy week certainly gives us plenty of opportunity for obedience. Just come...

Let us pray.