

## *A Unique Vantage Point*

The sixth sermon in a Lenten series entitled *Journeying to Jerusalem*

John 12.12-16

*Palm Sunday*

April 5, 2009

When, in that final week, He was entering Jerusalem they thundered Hosannas, and greeted Him with branches.

- Boris Pasternak

Give us some distance from the noise, some reserve about the loud success of the day, that we may remember that our life consists not in things we consume but in neighbors we embrace.

- Walter Brueggemann

### *The Reading*

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-- the King of Israel!" <sup>14</sup>Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: <sup>15</sup>"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" <sup>16</sup>His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

### *Dazed and Confused in New Orleans*

One of my favorite cities in the Deep South is New Orleans; or, as we used to say down home, N'alins. I traveled often to New Orleans in my youth; but only once had the good fortune to visit during Mardi Gras. New Orleans during Mardi Gras – how shall I put it? - is absolutely unique. It is at the same time glittering and garish; energizing and enervating; divine and devilish. Fat Tuesday in New Orleans is unique; I know I will never forget my experience.

To cite but one example, I will never forget my experience with "throws"; that is, the necklaces, coins, and other cheap plastic objects thrown from floats by the thousands during the Mardi Gras parades. The revelers lining the streets are mesmerized by the throws; they clamor, scramble, and fight to see who can collect the most of these shiny, divine trinkets. On

---

*James R. "Bo" Crowe  
Overland Park Christian Church*

the evening of our arrival, I watched with disdain as people from all walks of life made fools of themselves. “You’d never catch me fighting for those foolish things,” I told myself smugly. By the time we reached our last parade two days later, however, I found myself caught up in the frenzy and – as you might have imagined – clamoring and fighting for throws with the best of ‘em. There I stood on the front row, my neck laden with necklaces, scouring the floats for signs of more activity. “Just one more,” I thought, “Just one more.” As I stood ready to pounce, a necklace fell between my wife Chris and me; our eyes met and instantly declared war. Chris reached down for the throw first, so I stamped my foot down on top of it, glared at my loving wife, and cried out like a Viking warrior of old, “This treasure is mine!” I thought I was above the appeal of Mardi Gras and its parades; but I just didn’t get it; I didn’t understand what those parades were all about.

### *Failed Expectations*

I can’t help but think there were one or two revelers lining the streets of Jerusalem some two thousand years ago who just didn’t get it when Jesus rode by. They truly didn’t understand what that parade was about; neither the parade, nor the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes it would elicit from them. Lord knows there were plenty of people to line the streets and then some. Jerusalem during Passover in Jesus’ day was full to overflowing with pilgrims from around the known world. Jews from the Diaspora who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover, one of the highest holy days of the year. Many were obliged to camp outside the city, and to make their way in for the festival as best they could.

There were plenty of pilgrims to line the streets for this little side show; one Jesus of Nazareth entering the Holy City ...on a donkey’s back. What a strange procession, led by one who came in humility not in triumph; one who came to proclaim the victory of ...the victory of what? The power to coerce, dominate, and destroy? No; this Jesus came to proclaim and underscore with his very life the power of love and compassion not to destroy, but to create.

I’m sure you will agree this was a strange procession making its way into the heart of Roman-held territory, and I have to think there were many lining the streets who just didn’t get it. Some, for example, might have fought their way to the front row in hopes that this healer

would work his magic on them - abracadabra - and take away what ailed them. They had no idea that Jesus was not a snake-oil salesman; they had no idea that God's idea of healing doesn't include quick fixes and magical cures. God much prefers to work in partnership, working in, through, and with us; respecting our freedom and the choices we have made in the past; and inspiring those who love us, those who care for us medically and personally. Those who lined the streets in search of a quick fix or a magical cure just didn't get it.

Others may have lined the streets in search of distraction or entertainment; some diversion from the concerns of the day. Surely they would have found Jesus and his entourage curious, and entertaining in a strange sort of way. And all the commotion threatened to catch the ear of Rome. Perhaps this day would get interesting; perhaps there would be a few fireworks if they clashed with the authorities.

Many people flirt with religion in this way; looking for diversion, distraction from their concerns, and entertainment. Let the entertainment value wear off, however, and they are nowhere to be found. They are off looking for their next roadside attraction. Jesus didn't seek disciples who dabbled in faith; rather, he sought disciples who would follow him into the heart of Roman power and traditional religious authority. Those who lined the streets of Jerusalem looking for distraction just didn't get it.

It's a sure bet there were some lining the streets who sought power, revenge against foreign rule, and the establishment of a Jewish state like that of old. They hoped this Jesus would be the one to stand up to Rome; that this Jesus would be the one to incite the righteous to rebellion against this pagan rule. They were blind to the scene that unfurled before them; Jesus of Nazareth entering humbly into the Holy City to proclaim the enduring power of love and compassion.

I recently saw a bumper sticker that failed to amuse me. This is hard to do, mind you, because I generally find bumper stickers amusing as long as they are not on my car. This one read simply, "There are three ways to achieve peace: God, guts, and guns." Now, I can agree with the God part of the slogan, although there might be some argument over the nature of the God who brings peace, and the nature of peace too for that matter. God knows there are times we have to resort to violence as a nation. Parents sitting in this room have children in harm's

way as we speak, and many of us pray for them daily. There are times we have to resort to violence to maintain a pale semblance of peace, but if we pay attention to the God revealed in Jesus it will never be anything but a last, desperate measure after all other efforts have failed. All the guns and guts in the world achieve nothing more than a cessation of violence; a short respite, a bit of wiggle room in which to seek peace and reconciliation. Guns and guts will never deliver peace in our world; they will never be enough. Only God can deliver the kind of peace that Jesus proclaimed on his entry into Jerusalem.

### *One Who 'Got It'*

There were plenty of pilgrims and to spare to line the streets of Jerusalem as Jesus passed by. Some sought magical cures that required no personal investment; they didn't get it. Others sought diversion and distraction; they didn't get it either. Others still sought vindication of their political cause, and revenge against Rome; they missed it by a country mile. I can envision, however, one pilgrim who got it; one pilgrim who understood the symbolism of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in humility and peace. But this pilgrim wasn't on the front row; not even close. In fact, this pilgrim didn't quite make it to the parade, because a need had arisen, the pilgrim had passed someone in need on the way and stopped to offer compassion and care. The view from a distance was obscured by haze and the dust of the day kicked up by human and beast alike; but our pilgrim had a unique vantage point, the vantage point of compassion; and our pilgrim got it. Our pilgrim saw what Walter Brueggemann has underscored in our day; that life consists not in things we consume but in neighbors we embrace. It is my prayer that we, too, will get it as we enter this holiest of weeks. Amen.