

The Gifts of Jesus: Joy

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Matthew 21:1-11

Have you ever read a book twice? How about movies? Have you ever seen a movie more than once?

For most of us, the answer is, “of course.” Probably not with a book you hated, or a movie you despised. But it’s not unusual to reread a good book, or to watch again a favorite movie.

My wife does this a lot with books. Fairly often she’ll reach for a book she’s read before. If you ask her why, she’ll probably say it’s because she can’t find anything else to read; but really she just liked the book and wants to read it again.

For her, it’s no problem that she knows where the story is going. That doesn’t ruin it for her. Actually, it enhances it. She takes pleasure in following the story again. Her knowledge of the story gives her an anticipation of its contours, and this increases her appreciation of the story.

Not only that, she very often sees things in the story she didn’t notice the last time around. Knowing the story allows her to take in more the second or third time through. As she rereads the book, she experiences it with greater understanding, a fuller awareness of the author’s intent. After all, she knows where this is going.

Back in the late 1980s, a very funny movie came out called “The Princess Bride.” I’m sure some of you know it.

Back then, two friends of mine, Chayris and Doug, were huge fans of this movie. Really, I think they went to see it, I kid you not, seven times! I didn’t get it then. Why would you want to see the same movie over and over? But now I think I do get it. Each time they saw it, they found even more in it that made them laugh, even more reasons to love this silly movie:

the subtle puns,
the great lines,
the comic timing,
the look on Billy Crystal’s face,
Mandy Pantinkin’s fake Spanish accent.

Knowing where the movie was going didn’t ruin the experience for them. It enhanced it. It gave them a better understanding of the whole thing. After all, they know where this is going.



The same thing is true, I believe, with how we appreciate the story of scripture. I find this to be the case especially with how we follow the narrative of events recounted on a day like

today, Palm Sunday. For we know where this is going. And yet that doesn't spoil it for us. No, it doesn't. Knowing where this is going enlightens for us the path the story takes, and helps us grasp its deep meaning.

And that's what this day is about:

a path,
a route from origin to destination,
a journey with a road that connects start to finish.

On Palm Sunday, we remember the path Jesus took: riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the first leg of a journey that would change the world.

And we know where this is going. So we know that all that surrounded his entry into Jerusalem,

the fanfare,
the excitement,
the shouts of "Hosanna,"

none of it would last.

We know that while he was welcomed on Sunday, he would be cast aside on Friday.

We know that the crowd was fickle, and their enthusiasm would evaporate.

We know that they misunderstood Jesus and had shallow expectations of him.

Because they were wrong about Jesus, wrong in so many ways.

Some thought of him as a wonder-worker, whose tricks made for good entertainment.

Some saw him as a fortune teller, whose advice made for good personal guidance.

Some saw him as a political revolutionary, whose charisma was good for overthrowing the Romans and reestablishing Israel to its former glory.

Some thought of him as a prophet. That's good, certainly better, but not entirely adequate. For prophets come and go, showing up to challenge and confront and then, when the need no longer exists, to disappear.

They didn't understand that Jesus was not really any of those things, that he was far more than those things. They failed to recognize Jesus for who he was:

the Promised One;
Immanuel, "God with us";
the King who conquers not by force but by forgiveness;
the Son of God whose gift is joy.

They failed to see these things in him, and so they failed to understand him. They were wrong about him.

But the crowds, they were not wrong about one thing. On that day, they were not wrong

to welcome him,
to rejoice in him,
to shout "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

They may have had so much wrong in their understanding of Jesus. Their motives may have been completely askew, their sincerity somewhat lacking. But it was not a mistake for them to shout “Hosanna!” when Jesus entered the city. Even in their ignorance, even with their mixed motives, they did get something right:

that Jesus was to be welcomed,
and welcomed joyfully;
that in him something marvelous was happening;
that on him the hand of God did truly rest;
that by him they were given joy.



It was not wrong for them to feel joy at that moment, to embrace it as his gift. Nor is it for us.

Because *we* know where this is going.

We know that the adulation will turn to persecution.
We know that the adoring crowds will soon become an angry mob.
We know that his popularity will collapse.
We know that he will suffer.
We know that he will die.

We know these things. We know where this is going. We know that the sad steps Jesus will take are not a mere unpleasantness to be ignored or to be lightly passed over. We know that these are deeply part of who Jesus was and is, he who entered the city riding on a donkey.

We know where this is going.

And so we know that the insincerity of the crowd will not win out,
that their fickleness will not have the last word.
that the path Jesus walks through death will arrive at life.

We know where this story is going, a journey that includes Palm Sunday and Easter, to be sure, but also includes the days in between them:

the teaching, service, and nurture of Maundy Thursday;
the betrayal, suffering, and death of Good Friday;
the quiescence, waiting, and rest of Holy Saturday.

We know what the crowds did not know: that Palm Sunday celebration is empty without Good Friday sorrow just as it is incomplete without Easter joy.

We know these things, and we know where this is going. And knowing this, we can do what the crowds could not do. We can truly celebrate with deep joy the arrival of this king who humbly enters the city on a donkey. We can shout even more joyfully our Hosannas. We can do all this because we know how much this king has gone through for God’s glory and for our benefit.

We know the depths of his love.
We know the extent of his grace.
We know the breadth of his forgiveness.

So we have reason to celebrate, reason to welcome our humble king with great joy. For we know where this is going.

After all, we know where he has gone.
And this gives us joy. Because joy is his gift.



And yet, I wonder whether we have truly received and fully embraced Christ's gift of joy. I wonder if we, very often, resist the joy,

turning up our noses at his gift,
or feeling ourselves unworthy of his gift,
or thinking that the mark of authentic Christianity is a brooding countenance and a critical spirit,
or choosing to forge our identity around our wounds or disappointments or grievances rather than around and in response to Christ's gift of joy.

On this day, we are reminded of the crowds who welcomed Jesus with limited understanding and shallow sincerity. And yet, how sincere is *our* welcome, how complete *our* understanding?

On this day, we are invited to welcome Jesus with heartfelt Hosannas that arise out of an appreciation of the whole story. And yet, do we? How heartfelt is our welcome, how deep our understanding?

For our welcome cannot be truly joyful if we ignore the path that Jesus in fact took from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, if we overlook the suffering he freely endured so that we might be reconciled to God. Yet knowing where he was going, we can truly celebrate his arrival in the city, truly declare, "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

You see, we rob ourselves of a true appreciation for this day, and empty our joy of meaning, if we skip from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday with never a glance at the days in between.

And yet many do.

I ask you: how many of you will attend even one of the services held during the week, here or elsewhere, Maundy Thursday or Good Friday? And how many will decide "I can't be bothered"?

Really, without pondering what came in between, we do not, cannot, fully embrace his gift of joy. We do not, cannot, truly welcome our Lord, joyfully or otherwise. For without knowing, and pondering, and celebrating, what came in between, we would be welcoming only the sentimental creation of our minds, only our own imagined Jesus, who, on entering the city, pleasantly received the accolades of a group of adoring fans.

Do you know what he would be then? He would be

a peacemaker in a world with no conflict,

a redeemer with no captives to redeem,
a forgiver of any and all, were anyone actually in need of forgiveness,
a giver of good feelings to already happy people.

And with such an empty, impotent Messiah, what need would there be for a joyful welcome?

Nor will our welcome be truly joyful if we willfully choose to ignore the fact that we know where this is going, if we choose (perhaps as some kind of morbid religious exercise) to keep the light of Easter from intruding into this Sunday in Lent.

As if we could!

For we know where this is going. And Palm Sunday makes no sense without Easter Sunday, just as it makes no sense without the days in between.

How can we stifle our praise or squelch our joy? For we are grateful:

grateful for his strength, his peace, his humility;
grateful for his suffering, his death, his life.

And how can we not be grateful?

Because the gift of Jesus is joy, and we know where this is going.



My friends, this is what I hope for us today: that we truly welcome Jesus into our lives:

joyfully,
knowledgeably,
understanding who he is and where he went.

So, let us welcome him, and truly receive him into our lives. Let us

learn his humility,
follow his peace,
ponder his suffering,
walk in his light,
share in his meal,
embrace his joy,

and say with all sincere joy, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”