

“A Humble Ride with a Most Holy Purpose”

March 28, 2010

Luke 19:28-40

I had a dear friend named Lois Smith who once said this about Palm Sunday: “It was Jesus last really good day.” What followed was more and more opposition, betrayals, suffering and death. But Jesus must have enjoyed at least part of Palm Sunday. Let's take a look.

Luke 19: 28-40 - After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” 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; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem the people shouted, “Hosanna in the Highest!” Three out of the four gospels tell us that’s the word they used, “Hosanna!” The word means, “Lord, save us now!” “Lord, save us now!” Jesus was riding into town to do just that. I grew up probably watching too many westerns, but I’ve often thought of Palm Sunday like an old western movie, where in the final scene there’s a big showdown. And Jesus rides into Jerusalem for the fight of his life. But as you know, he wasn’t fighting for his life, he was fighting for ours.

I'd like to focus in on the Cross this morning. We're going to close the service by reading the account of Good Friday. Most denominations now call this Sunday, "Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday." And Gospels all tell us that the Palm Sunday parade, was really a ride to the Cross of Good Friday. Jesus knew that the opposition against him was headquartered in Jerusalem. If we would have read a little further on in Luke we would have seen in vs. 47 of the chapter that the "chief priests, the scribes, and leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill Jesus." It had been that way from almost the very start. You can go all the way back to chap. 4 of Luke and read of them trying to throw Jesus off a cliff. He faced 3 years of that. Scholars believe that's why Jesus spent most of his time in northern Israel, around the sea of Galilee. It was too dangerous to go to Jerusalem, and he had a message to teach and disciples to train.

But now on Palm Sunday, he sets his sights on Jerusalem and rides right into their hands. He rides to the Cross, to lay down his life. How do you understand the Cross? How do you wrap your brain around Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of the World, God incarnate - dying on a Cross.

Illustration. On a much lighter note when I graduated seminary I did what a lot of my friends did. I put off entering the workforce a few more weeks by purchasing a plane ticket and a Eurail pass and backpacked throughout Europe for three weeks. I soon learned that every town and village had a castle, a waterfront and a cathedral. I of course spent a lot of time in the great Cathedrals. Many of them are Roman Catholic and had large Crucifixes above the high altar. People would sit in the front pews and stare for hours at Jesus upon the Cross. I'd see them when I walked in, I'd take a tour of the cathedral, climb to the top of the steeple, go to the gift shop, and when I was leaving the same folks were still there staring at Jesus upon the Cross, often in tears, meditating upon him. I thought of that hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." When you survey the Wondrous Cross, what do you see there? How do you understand it?

When I look at the Cross I see at least these three things:
I. I see the Empathy of God, the empathy God has for and with humanity. Hebrews 4:15 speaks of Jesus as a great High Priest who connects us to God, and the writer says this: "*We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tested in every way . . . so that when we approach the throne of grace, we know we'll*

find mercy and help.” Hebrews 2:17 says he, “*had to become like us in every respect,*” so that we might know that our Savior knows the human experience, including death. “*Therefore he is able to help us.*”

Illustration. Do you remember the TV show, “The Odd Couple”? It featured the uptight Felix Unger and the laid back Oscar Madison. Well, there was one episode where Oscar bought a new car, and he’s very proud of the car, but there’s a problem - they live in New York City and Oscar can never find a parking space. He drives around for hours trying to find one. So he decides he has no choice but to get rid of the car. But then he realizes that if he sells the car he loses all kinds of money (you know, how cars depreciate the minute you drive off the lot). So Oscar comes up with a scam to allow the car to get stolen, so that he gets a higher value for it from his insurance company. Felix, of course, does not approve of this plan. “You mustn’t do that, Oscar. It’s wrong, and God would never approve. God wouldn’t forgive you. God would never understand.” To which Oscar replied, “God would understand if he had a car in New York City!”

The Cross of Jesus Christ is proof that God understands. The British theologian John Stott wrote: “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the Cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?” The Cross shows us the empathy of God.

II. Secondly, when I look at the Cross I see the supreme example of Love, Sacrificial Love. St. Peter in a letter to some early Christians put it this way: “*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*” (I Peter 2:21)

Tony Campolo tells a story about a new recruit who went into training at Paris Island, hoping to become a Marine. He was someone who seemed a bit out of step with the norm, and quickly became the subject of ridicule for those who enjoy picking on offbeat people. In the barracks he was assigned to, there was a great deal of meanness going on, particularly directed at him. One day the others came up with a plan to humiliate him and scare the daylights out of him. They disarmed a grenade without him knowing it. Then they threw it into the middle of the floor near where he was and pretended it was about to go off. “It’s a live grenade! It’s a live grenade!” they shouted. They expected him to get hysterical and maybe jump out a window. Instead, the young man fell on the grenade and cradled it in his stomach, yelling to the others, “Run for your lives. Run for your lives.” The

other marines froze in stillness and shame. They realized that the one they had scorned was ready to lay down his life for them. And so it was with Jesus. Misunderstood & scorned but he rode into Jerusalem that day to lay down his life for us all, as the Supreme example of sacrificial love. “*No greater love has anyone than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*” That’s why we have beautiful crosses today. Because Good Friday is such an example of a love that is pure, unconditional, and beautiful. The Empathy of God. The Supreme Example of Love. And finally,

III. The Cross is our Atonement. I Peter 3:18 - “*Christ died for our sins, once and for all, in order to bring us to God.*” In this act of unconditional love, God has swallowed up our sins, and has therefore made us one with our Creator once again. Atonement means “at-one-ment.” “Christ died for our sins in order to bring us to God.” That’s something we can never totally understand this side of heaven - how God freed us by the Cross. But we can let the Cross of Christ do its work and bring us to God.

Illustration. Max Lucado is a pastor and author who grew up in Texas. He tells the story of a BB gun that he and his brother got for Christmas. They immediately set up a firing range in the backyard and spent the Christmas day firing at an archery target. Getting bored with that they decided to try something trickier and got a small hand-held mirror and tried to shoot at the target backwards. Not a good idea. The BB shot over the target, over the shed behind the target, over the fence behind the shed. They didn’t know where it had landed until the neighbor soon appeared at the back fence wanting to know who shot the BB through his sliding glass door and who was going to pay for it. Max Lucado wrote: “At this point I disowned my brother. I changed my last name and claimed to be a holiday visitor from Canada. My father was more noble than I. Hearing the noise, he appeared in the backyard and talked with the neighbor. Among his words were: ”Yes, they are my children. “Yes, I’ll pay for their mistakes.” Christ says the same about you. ”Yes, they are my children. “Yes, I’ll pay for their mistakes.” He knows we miss the target and sometime incur debts we can’t pay. Romans 3: 25 says, “*God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins.*” - in order to bring us to God.

Take a good look at the Cross of Christ this week, and let it bring you to God. Amen.