

EVERYONE LOVES A PARADE

Luke 19: 29-30

Palm Sunday - April 4, 2004

Union Church of Cupertino

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I grew up in a small town 32 miles north of Boston, Massachusetts. We had about 6,000 residents and the Main Street shopping district was three blocks long. Woolen mills clustered along the Shawsheen River and there were a number of outlying farms. My family did not own a car and the Boston and Maine Railroad was our link to the world. In one direction it ended at North Station which was right under the Boston Garden where the Boston Bruins played and where the circus hung out when it was in town. In the other direction the trains stopped at Scarborough Maine where it was a short walk from the station to my grandfather's beach house. I loved going in either direction, but the only thing you could count on for excitement if you stayed at home in Andover, Massachusetts, was the annual Memorial Day parade.

Usually the weather was good. The last of the mud would be drying up. If you were lucky the lilacs were in bloom and coconuts had arrived at the grocery store. I don't know how coconuts and Memorial Day came to be linked together in my hometown but they were and I remember one holiday when Joey Sullivan tried to open his coconut on John Yancey's head and both Joey and John missed the parade.

Marching groups came from all over Essex County. Each unit was assigned a position in the mouth of one of the streets that fed into the lower town square: South Main Street, High Street, Elm Street, School Street, Essex Street. About 10:00 a.m. the selectmen started on their speeches and then, on an equitable rotating basis, one of our local ministers led in prayer. We may have been a small town but we had a Baptist Church, an Episcopal Church, a Roman Catholic Church and five Congregational churches. A bugler played taps and a military drill team fired their rifles into the air. "Attention! Present Arms! Fire!" This litany was repeated three times and before it was over the ground under the soldiers feet was littered with little boys grabbing for the casings that had been ejected from the guns. They were brass, about one inch long, and were perfect for making bombs later on in the summer when things would start to get dull. All it took was some jetex fuse, the centers from a roll of caps, cotton, a candle and you could blow a garbage can lid 8 feet into the air.

But I've gotten away from the parade.

After the speeches, the prayer and the salutes, the parade would start to move. By the time I was 12 I was marching with the Boy Scouts, Troop 72. Sometimes I got to carry one of the flags. There was a leather strap that went around your neck and at the bottom a cup that held the base of the pole so you could hold it higher up. You had to watch that the eagle at the top of the pole didn't snag on a tree branch and, more importantly, that the American flag was always just a little bit more erect than the Boy Scout flag. All of this was stirring to the heart of a 12 year old boy, but best of all was that, year after year, our scour troop got

to march behind the Clan McPherson band. Clan McPherson consisted mostly of bagpipers but they had a high strutter out in front with a huge baton and a drummer out back who wore a leopard skin sash. His drum was on a swivel so that he could make it spin and he'd hit it before he twirled it a then hit it again.

Please know all this was very special: marching up Main Street, past the A & P and the Gulf Station with people applauding... all the way up the hill to Phillips Academy where they'd be more speeches and the laying of a wreath.

Everyone loves a parade!

It was in the same bloom of springtime that Jesus rode into Jerusalem. People came out of their houses to applaud as if he were a conquering hero: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" Matthew tells us that some of the people ripped branches from the trees and laid them on the roadway for a carpet.... others, predating Sir Walter Raleigh, placed their cloaks upon the ground:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord....
Make the rough places smooth. - Isaiah 40: 3,4

Everyone was on tip toe! The air was electric! Who doesn't love a parade?

Well, perhaps Eudora Welty. In 1983, the author was invited to Harvard University to give a series of lectures in which she related a number of the childhood experiences that became important to her writing. Ms. Welty told of the day the circus came to Jackson, Mississippi:

There lived a little boy two or three streets over from ours who was home sick in bed, and when the circus came to town that year, someone got the parade to march up a different street from the usual way to the Fairgrounds (and) past his house. He was carried to the windows to watch it go by. Just for him the ponderous elephants, the plumes, the spangles, the acrobats, the clowns, the caged lion, the band playing, the steam calliope, the whole thing! Not long after that (the boy) disappeared forever... having died of whatever had given him this special privilege. - *One Writer's Beginnings*, pg. 37.

Eudora Welty admitted that ever since she has had "an ominous feeling" whenever she encounters a parade. She specifically mentioned the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* as another parade that went astray. She wrote:

When a parades comes around the corner... (I) greet it with distrust and apprehension until I know what it's all about. - *Ibid.*

So, almost everyone , loves a parade.

But, there's also the Rev. Stephen C. Peabody, one of my predecessors at First

Congregational Church in San Jose. He was the fifth generation of his family to attend Harvard University and on the day of his graduation in 1917, he, and every other member of the graduating class, paraded from the college hall to the recruiting office and volunteered for service in the U.S. Army. It was a glorious burst of patriotic fervor. They would help 'save the world for democracy.' Stephen was assigned to a base in the deep South where it became his duty to train recruits in what the Army called the "spirit of the bayonet." He became an expert in the art of close combat, how to thrust and then lift so as to do maximum damage to the internal organs. After a while he began to meet some of his graduates as they returned from the trenches, broken men, men etched by the violence they had done to others and the violence that they had endured. Stephen became a pacifist and was ever after suspicious of parades that would sweep up youngsters and carry them off to war. During World War II Rev. Peabody remained a pacifist and was very unpopular among those who did not know him. His complaint was never with the soldier. No one in San Jose did more to support the men and women in the armed services or their families. His was a distrust of such as politicians who would get athlete's mouth jumping on and off bandwagons, who would beat the drum and demand a lock-step responses but never once consider what might be the human cost.

Some there are who don't like a parade.

But can't we say that Jesus enjoyed the pomp and the circumstance? After all, it seems that he had a active part in staging his entry into Jerusalem; that he intentionally tried to fulfill Zechariah's prophecy (9:9):

See, your king comes... riding on a donkey.

Yes. It seems Jesus staged the parade but he gave it a twist... "Not as conquering hero do I come but as God's servant in the world..."

Jesus rode into a maelstrom of false expectations. He had not promoted himself as a military messiah but there were cheering because they hope that he would be a latter day King David. Jesus had never said that he would drive out the Roman legions but there were some following him praying that that would be the net result. There were people marching behind Jesus because they imagined the parade would lead to patronage: "Jesus, when you come into your kingdom will you please place my sons on your left and your right?" There were some behind Jesus because they had an eye for financial gain. One of his disciples already had the reputation of being "pious for the purse," and his descendants are present even now. There were people following Jesus because it was the only thing going on on an otherwise boring day. "What's happening man? Nothin' much but at least this lines's moving."

And just as soon as these varied followers realized that Jesus was not planning to fulfill their agenda, they began to change their tune. "Hosanna," was forgotten. "Crucify him!" was now on many lips. Those few who actually stuck with Jesus were those who grasped his vision of being God's servants in the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin was once speaking with a group of elderly Chinese Christian ministers. He asked them, "what was it that first drew you to Jesus?" They pondered this a

while. One said that it was not the miracles. In oriental mythologies there were far greater miracles than what the Bible contained.

Another said that, for him, it was Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Quickly the others agreed. That the Son of God should take the place of a servant is what had won their hearts and claimed their lives.

I think I'm going to have to change the title of my Palm Sunday sermon. Not everyone loves a parade. Nor does Christianity have much to do with pomp and circumstance, with marching and munching, with noses and nickels or smells and bells... rather it is a call to servanthood.... and humility....and love given without measure.

Unfortunately, in our world, these things seldom strike up the band.

See, your king comes to you, humble and riding upon an ass.