

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've heard it's one amazing experience, one that's not quickly forgotten. Young kids line the streets, their bikes at their sides, just standing there, full of great hopes and expectations. You know why? They're waiting for the Green Bay Packer players to head out to the practice field during offseason practices because the tradition is, the players each choose a kid, grab their bikes, and ride it to practice, surely a big deal to those kids who have their bikes ridden by football stars. And then, if they triumph in the championship, I'm sure they can't help but marvel, "That person rode my bike!"

Maybe you've had an experience like that before, where you brushed shoulders with someone famous or important, a moment you won't forget too quickly. How would you describe your feelings? Can't imagine it would be anything but pumped and excited to have that happen to you, right?

Well, I guess that could begin to explain the amazing experience I was blessed to be a part of that first Palm Sunday. I didn't have the President knocking on my door. I didn't have any famous sports athletes asking to hitch a ride. In fact, I didn't really know what I was getting at first.

You see, to me, it started out just like any Sunday in the beautiful suburb of Bethphage. I woke up early, and after a healthy breakfast of figs and oats, I went to tend to my pets, my beloved donkey and my prize, her fairly young, new colt, not even broken in yet. Not ridden once.

I was in the middle of putting some fresh water in their trough when a couple of men approached me, or rather, approached my donkeys. I stood there in amazement as they brushed right by me and went about untying the colt. Could they have really been that foolish, to try to steal my colt while I was standing right there?

"What are you doing?" I asked in my shock. "Why are you untying my colt?" "The Lord needs it," was all they replied as they continued to untie it. At that time, I didn't know what came over me, but I just let them do it.

Now, before you go and label me as a fool for letting them just take my prized possession without so much as a fight, know I didn't let them off quite that easy. I was still skeptical, so I tagged along. We met up with the rest of the group at the edge of town, and they threw their soft coats on the colt's back and helped their leader (he looked really familiar) but helped him up onto the colt. And with that, we began our walk towards Jerusalem.

Now I've been to Jerusalem a thousand times before, even when the city was packed with tourists coming from all over for the Passover celebration. But I'll tell you, it was nothing like that Palm Sunday. You would have thought someone famous was coming, the way the street leading into Jerusalem was lined with people, hundreds of them, carrying palm branches, laying their cloaks on the road.

All this, for the man sitting on my colt, receiving a king's welcome. But who was he? I must not have been the only one thinking that, as I heard the whispers of people as we walked by, "Who is this?" And without pause, there were handfults of people, gleefully shrieking, "This is Jesus of Nazareth!"

Ah, now I know who this stranger is. No wonder he looked so familiar. Not only had I heard the stories about Jesus, of his inspired preaching, his incredible miracles, but I had seen him a couple times as well, just a magnificent man, now being treated like royalty.

And then, just as if on cue, the whole crowd erupted into jubilant song. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." I'll tell you, sounds like this hadn't been heard in Jerusalem since the times of the great King David, when he would return after one of his famous triumphs over Israel's enemies, louder still even than a stadium packed tight with adoring fans, celebrating a championship victory by their beloved team.

It was beyond awesome, a procession fit to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem, amidst shouts of praise and songs of triumph. It was such an honor to have Jesus riding on my donkey, the King of heaven and earth.

Well, you know how every party has its poopers. Bet you can guess who they were. Not surprisingly, on this day, it was the Pharisees, Jesus' arch-enemies. I can't imagine how much these joyful sounds must have been torturing them. Finally, they couldn't contain their anger and resentment no longer. They stormed up to Jesus and demanded he make them stop. Tell them to quit this nonsense, this singing.

I distinctly remember seeing a smirk form on Jesus' lips at that time, as he chuckled to himself and said, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." And he wasn't kidding. This was his day. One way or another, he would get his praise. He would get the glory due him. And if the people wouldn't give it to him, all of creation would.

Such an incredible day! I'm so glad I lent my donkey for Jesus to use. You know, in my mind, I thought nothing could ruin this day. Not even those wicked Pharisees. It was near perfect. But not quite. You know, walking with Jesus and his followers during the whole route, I was able to observe his disciples throughout.

Now, don't get me wrong. They were just as overcome with joy and excitement as the crowds lining the streets were. But at the same time, I could tell a lot of them were a little off. You could see it in their eyes. I guess the best way to describe what I was seeing in them was a nervous anticipation building up inside of them.

It had really started back at my house, when a couple of the disciples had come to get my colt. Everything had happened in Bethphage just as Jesus had told them it would, down to the very smallest of details. Then it clicked for them. If Jesus was spot on when he earlier predicted exactly how they would get the donkey for him, and knowing he had never lied to them before, then what Jesus had also said so many times during his ministry, about him going to Jerusalem to die, that also had to be true.

And so they were celebrating, yes, but at the same time they were also subdued, their eyes darting from side to side, half-expecting some surprise attack, just not knowing when Jesus was going to be taken from them.

An uneasy feeling, a nervous tension, and I felt it too. Yes, it was a wonderful celebration, welcoming Jesus like a king to Jerusalem, but was it really for his triumph? It sure didn't seem that way, with the week, starting with this grand entrance, but ending with Jesus' slow and painful walk to Calvary's mount, to be crucified, killed, as a criminal. Certainly no triumph there, right?

And what's so sad is why he comes to Jerusalem. It's because of me. It's because of you. It's because of our sins. Those times I've yelled at my children in anger, speaking words I know I wouldn't dare repeat if Jesus were standing right next to me, all because they were being disrespectful of me, not obeying me as God tells them to in his Word.

Those Sunday mornings for you, Sabbath days for me, holy days to God, days we're supposed to devote time to God, to worship him. And I know how it goes, finding a hundred excuses not to spend time with him. For me, it was getting caught up in my hobbies, my pets, my sleep, but sinfully neglecting God.

And I could go right down the list of the Ten Commandments, with lust, cheating God, cursing, idolatry, greed, coveting, gossip, I'm guilty of all of them. Are they your sins, too? Those are definitely a far cry from the praises we give him today, on Palm Sunday. More like the slaps and the lashes and the nails Jesus received on Good Friday, from you and me as well. But it's us who should be getting those punishments. Us, trounced by sin, defeated, deserving of hell.

The shouts of praise on that road to Jerusalem snapped me out of my funk. You know, it's not about what we've done. It's about what Jesus is coming to do.

Can you hear what they're shouting? Yes, "Hosanna!" is their cry. Yes, they sing blessings to the one who comes in the name of the Lord. But did you catch the last part of their jubilant song? "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Do those words remind you of anything? Of another joyous song? What about at Jesus' birth? Angels in the fields, tending their sheep, and lo, a choir of angels appeared before them, praising God and saying, "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST and on EARTH PEACE TO MEN on whom his favor rests!"

The choir of angels, singing the praises of the newborn King, welcoming him into the world. And now, a different choir, singing praises of the same King, welcoming him into Jerusalem, along the road to the cross...to bring peace...to bring triumph!

You know, it's such a neat comparison to the kings of ancient times. After they would win a war against their enemies, do you know what would happen? They would ride back into town in a magnificent parade leading their defeated enemies behind, chained, humiliated. And their faithful subjects would line the streets, singing the praises of their victorious king, the one who had brought them peace. That parade was called a triumph.

Isn't that what was happening here? Jesus rides, the people praise him, it doesn't seem like triumph because he rides to his death.

But examine his cross, and you see nothing but triumph. It was there where he took on our spiritual enemies, our sins, death, and the devil, and he did not lose. By his cross, by his death, he conquered them all. His words, "It is finished" signaled his triumph. His work was done. The war was over. Our sins were wiped out. Satan was humiliated. Death was defeated. Jesus won.

His resurrection only served to solidify that fact as he rose victorious, a greater triumph even than that of Palm Sunday. He rose, King of heaven and earth, peace won. Peace for you and me. Peace between us and God.

Palm Sunday, that's the walk Jesus is making. His walk to triumph. It seems like a paradox, a contradiction. The man entering Jerusalem today as a king sitting atop his royal beast, the donkey, will walk out of it in a few days a condemned criminal, stumbling under the weight of the cross. The same people singing their "Hosanna! Save us!" to him today will change their tunes to the blood-curling cries of "Crucify him!" on Friday. The man, raised up and exalted with these shouts of praise today will soon be humbled, bearing the sins and their punishment for the entire human race.

The two walks seem to be so different, and yet, they're not. Today, Jesus' road involves triumph. He is the King. He will win the victory. He will triumph in peace. And in a few days, he will triumph on his cross. He will win forgiveness for our sins.

So raise your voices. Let your hosannas be heard. He hears you, and he's coming to save us. And he triumphs! Amen.