

We've been using the psalms as our guide for our journey through Lent because the psalms are, more than anything, declarations that are a response to God's enormous passion to connect with your life and mine.

Today, on Palm Sunday, we see that passion in person – Jesus of Nazareth. Let's listen to the story of God's passion on parade.

(Read Matthew 21:1-11)

Are you a parade person? I am!

I have had the great fortune to sit in the main grandstand and watch the Rose Bowl parade from beginning to end; I've yelled 'throw me something' at many a Mardi Gras parade; I've waited for Santa Claus at oh-so-many Christmas parades; Macy's Thanksgiving Parade is on my bucket list; and who can count all the others:

Circus parades, Homecoming and 4th of July, Dads with video cameras, Moms waving – everybody loves a parade, don't they?

Well, what about this parade in our gospel lesson this morning?

One man, riding a donkey. Not much of a parade when you compare it to all the others.

In our gospel story, it's Passover time in Jerusalem - there again, celebrating a parade of Hebrew slaves out of Egypt.

The four gospels give us different scenes of that first Palm Sunday:

John is the only gospel to mention palms; Luke makes note of how large the crowds are; Mark points out how they spread their cloaks and leafy branches along the road; and Matthew is the one who takes special note of how the city was in turmoil because of this one-man parade.

All are different in painting the picture of that first Palm Sunday, but all four gospels have the same script of the crowd yelling, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Now also in this crowd are the Pharisees, they have seats at the parade like some of those that will be in the Mercedes-Benz stadium – one of those way up high fancy suites!

You're in the crowd, but you can actually look down on the crowd as they cheer. And there you can remain as a disinterested, unchanged observer.

Which is exactly what the Pharisees were demanding, as Luke tells the story of the crowd shouting "Hosanna".

The religious leaders wanted this cheering, psalm shouting crowd to remain in their seats far away, to remain as they were: silently humming songs of faded love, busted dreams, somebody done somebody wrong and you can't do anything about it kind of tune.

But Jesus knew his Bible, he knows the psalm songs for this day, and Luke says that he told them, "Even if my people were silent, the stones themselves would have called out."

For all the gospels, the Psalms that surround this parade story are not lugubrious Presbyterian waltzes – these are songs like the kind Dick Clark on the old American Bandstand used to claim 'had a beat and you can dance to it' - as if Jerry Lee Lewis had been born in Jerusalem and was singing "Goodness Gracious, Great Donkey-Riding King!"

Psalms that are palm up "Here I am, Lord" - a high-five hallelujah, a fist-knock pump of praise, a hand-clapping disciple, friend of Jesus Christ letting loose with a, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

The quote is from Psalm 118 - As the psalm goes: This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Yes, one man riding a donkey, and a joy-filled, overflowing life-loving, cheering crowd!

But I have to be honest – this parade puzzles me!

On one hand, how else could Jesus have been greeted? He had been drawing huge crowds for some time now.

The things he did electrified the people: blind eyes regained their sight; paralyzed legs could walk again; hungry people were fed; demonized lives were made right; depressed spirits were lifted and made whole; hopeless hearts dared to hope again; he brought the laughter of love into life.

But on the other hand, in Luke's gospel, when Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah, Jesus ordered them not to say a word about it, and that's often the word in Mark's gospel, "Tell no one."

Obviously, all of that changed with this parade.

According to the story, Jesus arranged this one-man parade in spite of the fact that Herod wanted to kill him; that he had provoked the religious authorities, whom he called out as greedy, selfish, arrogant, insensitive – no one was going to be giving him the keys to the city!

Some would say that Jesus was simply fulfilling the words of the prophets. Matthew was certainly connecting Jesus to the prophets as he wrote his passion narrative.

It's obvious from the gospel stories that this man who wept for peace over the city wasn't going to be a military Messiah and run the Romans out of Jerusalem.

He was not going to be bullied by the Pharisees or even swayed by these people along the parade route.

No one controlled him with selfish desires, fear or guilt.

So, why did he ride that donkey into Jerusalem?

Because there was another parade that day, as the late Marcus Borg tells it.

From the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of Roman cavalry and soldiers, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the beating of drums.

Did the crowds watching that parade cheer or were the streets lined with silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful?

From the east comes this peasant rabbi from Nazareth, riding a colt down the Mount of Olives to the city surrounded by a crowd who are far from silent: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Do you think Jesus timed his own parade from the east to coincide with Pilate's triumphant entry from the west?

The meaning of Jesus' parade is clear, for it uses symbolism from the prophet Zechariah in the Jewish Bible.

According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, commanding peace to the nations, he will be a king of peace.

I think Jesus was making his own prophetic statement to his followers and to his enemies in this parade.

The time for secrecy was over. The time to speak truth to power and expose the duplicity and hypocrisy of the religious leaders and the oppressive powers of the world had arrived.

The time to speak for the powerless and expose the oppressors was long overdue.

The time to offer an alternative voice and way of living was at hand.

We live in a world that still follows the ancient parades of war and slaughter, of greed and destruction.

We live in a world of pharisaical fears that wants us to ignore, neglect, and reject the truth.

But we know how it must have been for that crowd long ago, those people who rejoiced when Jesus came into their city, and those people cried “Hosanna.”

And now here, one man riding a donkey... the human figure of divine speech, the Living Word...

The truth who will set us free... this one-man-riding-a-donkey-parade reveals his singular and steadiness of purpose that kept him from ever forsaking his commitment as one of us for us, even to the point of death.

Mattie Stepanek, 13 years old when he died, knowing early on that he would die, gives words to this purpose for living, in one of his poems:

*I wanted to live
To be
One hundred and one
Years old.
But that is no
Longer my goal.
When I die,
I die.
I cannot predict.
I cannot control.
I cannot change
What is to be,
Which is what it is
And will be
What it will be.
I wanted to live
To be,
And not die.
But,
While I'm alive,
I live
To the fullest.*

*I treasure each sunrise.
I remember each sunset.
I dance every dance and
I sing every song and
I celebrate every moment.
I wanted to live
To be.
And,
I am spending my time
On earth before death
Living,
Rather than dying,
And not wasting a moment
Of the precious gifts
Of time and
Of life and
Of being, for now. (“About Living, Part 3.”)*

God’s passion in Jesus challenges us to not waste a moment of the time we have now...

It means that this parade of Christ is a gift for you and me – this passion of Jesus that parades through our lives this week...

The grace of God that lives in him for us until his wisdom, until his teaching, until his healing, until his challenge for us to love one another changes us, moves us...

To enter that parade where Jesus leads, just as passionate to find God’s truth and as faithful in following it through.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY