

"Where Everyone Wants to Be"

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April 9, 2017

¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11)

About 8:30 a.m. our time this morning, in the old city of Bethphage, just outside the modern Israeli village of al-Eizariya, a multitude gathered. Many participated in a Catholic mass in a church built upon the ruins of an old crusader chapel. They then joined thousands of others outside in the courtyard to begin the walk to the Mount of Olives, then down into the Kidron Valley, past the traditional site of the garden of Gethsemane, and on through the Lion's Gate into the Old City of Jerusalem.

It is likely that 15,000 or more Christians joined this annual pilgrimage, as today's disciples followed the same hallowed path that Jesus and his disciples walked on a Sunday 2,000 years ago on the day of his "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. As these modern pilgrims walked, they sang joyful hymns, played instruments, prayed aloud and lifted enthusiastic "Hosannas" to the heavens. The spectacular throng of humanity typically includes the widest variety of Christians we can imagine: Catholics and Coptics; Episcopalians and Ethiopians; Lutherans and Lithuanians; American Baptists and Armenian Apostles; Franciscan monks and French priests; Palestinians and yes, even Presbyterians. Some wore impressive priestly hats and robes, while others sported ball caps or tattered scarves. In a carnival atmosphere, many waved long palm branches in the air. Some threw their own cloaks down upon the pavement, softening the path for the brothers and sisters behind them. For all of the participants, it is a time of joyful remembrance -- a chance for normal, everyday people to draw closer to Christ in mind, body and spirit by walking the same fateful path that he once took.¹ For Christians in and around Jerusalem, and for many pilgrims from around the world on Palm Sunday, this is the place where everyone wants to be.

About halfway down the procession route, as the group reaches the Mount of Olives and turns right for the final descent into the Kidron Valley, the pilgrims will behold a beautiful

¹ <https://www.viator.com/tours/Jerusalem/Palm-Sunday-in-Jerusalem-Mass-at-Bethpage-and-Via-Dolorosa-Procession/d921-5209JERPALM?pub=vcps>; <http://allaboutjerusalem.com/article/palm-sunday>

panoramic view of the Old City of Jerusalem. As they look upon the city from the heights, it will be impossible for them to miss what many call the “Graveyard Metropolis.”² The Kidron Valley, which lies in the hollow between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount, is home to thousands upon thousands of Jewish graves. According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will come into Jerusalem from the east, which means that his path entry will, by necessity, come right through this valley. Known in the Bible as the Valley of Jehoshaphat (which in Hebrew means “the valley where Yahweh shall judge”),³ the prophet Joel called the nations to gather themselves in that place, to rouse themselves to action, and bring their warriors to the valley of Jehoshaphat, “for there,” God says, “I will sit to judge all the ... nations (Joel 3:11-12).

Because of its importance, Jewish tradition also believed that anyone who was buried in this spot, where the gardens of kings had long been planted, would be resurrected first. As you might imagine, everyone thought it would be good to be first, which meant that burial sites in the Kidron Valley have always been highly sought after. Rumor has it that bodies in this area are actually stacked on numerous levels, like bunk beds on a submarine, with God’s slumbering warriors waiting for the final trumpet to call them back to consciousness on that great and fateful getting’ up mornin’. For the Jews who were looking for the Messiah of the prophets, and for all of those who still wait for that day that is surely coming, when the Lord will finally complete his work of reconciling the world to himself, the Kidron Valley is where everyone wants to be.

As it always does, this morning’s procession terminated at the Church of St. Anne in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. I expect many are still there, celebrating with friends and family, singing songs and offering prayers on this high holy day of hosannas and hallelujahs. You and I would be wise to linger here as well. We should stay in this moment, and get as close as we can to Jesus in this moment, because days like these, and times like these, are where everyone wants to be.

First, we want to be with the hero. The crowds are cheering this man who speaks with both authority and love. He is able to stand toe to toe with the most learned rabbis, but also show compassion to the lowliest leper and let the little children clamor into his lap. On this day, the crowds are cheering him, and even the most jaded and cynical in Jerusalem are asking “Who is this guy? Why have we never heard of him before?” It is estimated that as many as 100,000 Jewish pilgrims may have come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, and Jesus is ***the*** topic of conversation in every corner. Everyone wants to be with the hero.

We also want to be with someone who can help us in our need. Those who walk with him have seen Jesus heal the sick, cure the lame and give sight to the blind. He has promised that God’s law, which has promised justice to the poor and freedom to the oppressed is coming to fruition in him. They have seen him speak truth to power in dangerous ways without flinching or cowering. They are daring to ask, “Could he be the one to save us?” Everyone wants to be with someone who can heal us of our wounds, give us comfort in our grief, impart hope where there is none, and find us when we are lost.

We also want to be on the side of a team of destiny. When I lived in Washington D.C., the Redskins were having the best season in recent memory. All the pieces had finally come together. Fickle fate seemed to have turned in their favor, and with each win, the fan base grew stronger. By week four of the season, the Washington Post had created a “bandwagon” cartoon

² “Graveyard Metropolis,” <http://alt-arch.org>

³ “Kidron Valley”, <https://en.wikipedia.org>

to mark the growth. Each week, the bandwagon would grow stronger and more put together as more and more people rallied around the team. Old, long-suffering fans mocked the newcomers, but we didn't care. Everyone wanted in on the buzz, the high that came with a local team making good.⁴ In a similar but deeper and more lasting way, the destiny of Jesus had grown with each week of his ministry. His fan base grew, too. By Palm Sunday, he had reached rock star status. Everyone wants to be with a winner, and on that Sunday afternoon, Jesus was winning.

We also want to be with happy, joyful people. The people around Jesus were happy to be there. They were on their way to Passover, a jubilant celebration of what it means to be God's chosen people. These were, for the children of Israel, the lightest and most precious days of the year. Laughter and singing was in the air. It was a huge religious party, sanctioned and smiled upon by God. It was a place where every child of God wanted to be.

Last, but certainly not least, we want to be close to God. This is, is it not, the very definition of a "pilgrimage": a journey that is made to a sacred place as an act of faith, devotion and hope. Some disciples had already dared to utter it – that being in the presence of Jesus seemed to them to be every bit as life-giving as being in the presence of God the Father. Soon, a shocked and saddened centurion would voice the words that so many had come to believe in silence, that "surely, this was the Son of God." Even today, with so many rejecting organized religion for more fluid definitions of spirituality, people are still expressing a desire to know and experience God at incredibly high rates. To be near God, to feel God's power and presence in a palpable way, is where everyone wants to be.

And so we should linger here, on this day, with our brothers and sisters on the other side of the world, who are probably still milling about in the Church of St. Ann. That spot is very near to the traditional beginning of the *Via Dolorosa*, the "Way of Grief" that Jesus walked from his condemnation to his burial in the tomb. As this Holy Week begins, we will quickly descend into the dark valley of Jesus' final days. He will quickly enter a place where no one wants to be – a place of betrayal, denial, ridicule, abuse and murder – a place of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Many of the pilgrims who walked the happy, sunny trail this morning – with glorious views and praise-filled songs – will later walk a very different path once walked by Jesus.

But not today. Today we walk with the hero, with the man who can restore our health and our sight, with the man of destiny, with joyful people in front of us, behind us and beside us. Today, as we seek to draw close to God by walking God's steps, we will stay here – with our palms, with our songs and with our hope – because this, today, is where everyone wants to be.

Amen.

⁴ For a look at most of the 1991 "Bandwagon" art from the Washington Post, check out this link: <http://richardspooralmanac.blogspot.com/search/label/Washington%20Redskins>