

“A Great Life”  
March 28, 2021

Mark 11:1-11

When I was really young, before my family had a color television, there were three basic channels worth watching. ABC, NBC, and CBS. And one of the shows I used to look forward to on Saturday afternoons was ABC’s “Wide World of Sports.” It didn’t matter to me what sport they broadcast in any given week on that show...and some of the sports were really obscure. The introduction to the program mesmerized me every time I turned it on.

The music in the “Wide World of Sports” introduction was epic, full of trumpets and fanfare. But the legendary voice of broadcaster Jim McKay’s was even better. “Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sport. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.”

While Jim McKay voiced the “agony of defeat” phrase, the corresponding footage in the introduction was that of a ski jumper. Although I’m sure I could look it up, to this day I don’t know that ski jumper’s name or which country he was from. But as he was gliding down the ski jumping hill, picking up speed and getting ready to take off into the air, he miscalculated slightly. Or maybe he was sideswiped by a sudden gust of wind or thrown off course by a slick track. In any case, he lost his balance and veered off the parallel grooves for the two skis. Then he flipped and tumbled off the side of the ski jumping hill, arms and legs flailing and skis flying in different directions. The whole thing looked so devastating it’s a miracle he survived.

If ever there was video footage which perfectly matched the caption that was it. Every time I saw that program introduction, a small part of me kept thinking to myself maybe this is the time he stays on track and jumps off the end of the ski ramp like he was supposed to. Yet it never happened. No matter how many times I watched it, seeing that ski jumper crash spectacularly over the side of the hill was the visual epitome of the agony of defeat...

As we gather here for worship on this Palm Sunday morning, one way to look at the Palm Sunday story is to envision Jesus at the top of the hill the way that ski jumper was years ago. He’s in position at the starting gate. The bystanders are shouting his name and cheering. All systems are a go and Jesus simply had to ride into the city of Jerusalem.

The only difference between the story of Jesus and the ski jumper is the fact that Jesus knew what awaited him at the end of his ride. He had a sense of the disaster that would soon unfold. Jesus understood things weren’t going to end smoothly. The elements were not aligned in his favor. People in power stood ready to ambush him and knock him off balance. Jesus was about to crash spectacularly at the hands of his enemies.

Yes, Palm Sunday is Jesus Christ poised and ready. Picking up speed through Holy Week. Before failing painfully and catastrophically as Maundy Thursday morphs into Good Friday. And in the process becoming the all-time poster child for the agony of defeat.

We'll come back to that metaphor in a few minutes. Before we do, however, I don't want to forget about the other half of Jim McKay's legendary phrase. The corresponding footage wasn't nearly as memorable as the ski jumper, but there were also some athletes in the opening montage of "Wide World of Sports" celebrating "the thrill of victory."

The thrill of victory is also an apt description of Palm Sunday. We tend to assume, many of us, that because Jesus had an inkling of the opposition that awaited him in Jerusalem and some premonition his life was in danger, Palm Sunday had to be a somber event. Not for the boisterous crowds lining the roadside, but clearly for Jesus, who knew what was coming and therefore couldn't possibly focus on the waving palm branches and the shouts of "Hosanna."

Then again, the Gospel never gives us any reason to believe Jesus wasn't capable of living in the moment. On the contrary, the Gospel describes Jesus as a man who lived each moment fully, right up to the moment of his death on a cross.

Which leads us to the Palm Sunday story itself. Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to the village to find a colt that had never been ridden. Maybe the disciples grumbled amongst themselves at this task. They were only a few miles away from Jerusalem, after all, and the disciples might have wondered why they had to procure a colt for Jesus to ride when walking across the Galilean countryside was clearly their preferred method of travel.

Still, the disciples did as Jesus instructed, acknowledging the skeptical glances of the bystanders and colt owners with a promise they would return the colt asap. On the other hand, knowing the colt had never been ridden and was far from trained, maybe the owners were less reluctant to see the colt go than the story leads us to believe...

When the disciples returned from the village, Jesus climbed atop the colt and started calmly urging the skittish animal forward. The crowd on either side of the road leading into Jerusalem was cheering and whooping and hollering. They darted in front of Jesus and the colt to spread their cloaks and palm branches on the ground. In the midst of all the frenzied activity, somehow Jesus earned the trust of the colt enough that the colt wasn't spooked.

Because we know how the rest of the story turns out, right about here is the point where you and I attempt to fill in the extra spaces the narrative leaves out. Like, Palm Sunday was just the calm before the storm. The crowd didn't understand. Jesus wasn't in the mood. The whole scene was ominous and foreboding.

I'm not sure how much of that was true, however. It's every bit as possible that Jesus was in his glory that day, reaching out every few yards on the road to scoop up a toddler in his arms and take that child for a short ride. I can picture Jesus laughing out loud at the teenagers who ran alongside Jesus, keeping pace with the colt in spite of their parent's protestations. And all the adults who were there that day? Who among us, even in our grown-up years, doesn't love a good parade?

Meanwhile, Jesus was enjoying every minute of it. He would deal with Jerusalem when he made it inside the city limits. For now, however, it was a celebration! Jesus probably wanted to stop time that day and spend eternity with his adoring crowd. His days might have been numbered, but Jesus out on the Palm Sunday road was living a great life...living his best life, in fact.

The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Perhaps that is the ideal Palm Sunday caption.

There will be ample time during the upcoming Holy Week for lament and despair. The betrayal and the abandonment and the suffering and the violence Jesus once endured reflects what happens to far too many in our 2021 world. The senseless killing of Jesus, an innocent person, hits close to home in our 2021 world where innocent people are gunned down senselessly every day. The brutal crucifixion Jesus endured on the cross mirrors the ways in which people in 2021 are all too willing to crucify their own brothers and sisters. Different methods, same end result, it feels like we are living through Good Friday with frightening frequency...

Yet this day is not the time for people who love Jesus to keep a stiff upper lip and be hesitant about smiling and laughing. Now is not the time to steel our hearts knowing that sad, hard, long, heartbreaking days are on the way. You and I will get to that part over the course of this upcoming week...the agony, the crucifixion, the defeat...

Right now, though, we need to let go. We need to pick up our palm branches and wave them for all they're worth. We need to set aside our worries and our troubles. And we need to shout "Hosanna" like we really mean it. "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It's Palm Sunday and the crowd is cheering and the colt is ready to go and Jesus is in his element. Today, Jesus is living a great life. And he wants us to join him. Amen.