

Life is More Than Fiesta
Lesson: Isaiah 50:4-9, Matthew 21:1-11

Jerusalem that week was a little like Fiesta - without the \$50,000 dresses. It was supposed to be a holy week for Passover, but people had turned it into a holiday that was a little less than holy.

And the parade at the beginning of the week was genuinely *impromptu*. The news that Messiah had entered the city in a procession spread through the crowd, and they crowded the streets to see. Most all of them had heard that this Messiah was the real thing - not one of the many pretenders all promises and no power. This Jesus from Nazareth could heal the sick. More importantly, he stood up the Pharisees and Sadducees. He might even take on the Romans and "set Israel free." They had waited so long for a free nation that no one had a memory of freedom.

There he comes! Wait a minute? Why the donkey? Kings come on fine horses. He looks a little silly, sitting on that little thing. But they are shouting "Hosanna," and he is headed to the temple. This could be a week to remember in Jerusalem. I'm glad we came to see it.

Except for the crowds lining the streets to see the spectacle, there really isn't much in common about Passover in Jerusalem and Fiesta in San Antonio. Both times are like a brief vacation from daily living. But their daily lives were nothing like ours. They could not possibly imagine the life we take for granted. The truth is, because of the lives we live, we cannot really imagine their lives. But to understand what is really happening in that week, we need to try to imagine being one of them on the side of the street that Sunday.

You look around, and see a mix of nations and religions bound together by the gloved fist of the Roman empire. Jews had history and identity and a measure of self-rule in religious matters. But what that meant for us on the curb was we had to obey the Sanhedrin and the synagogue unless Pontius Pilot or a Roman soldier told us to do something, ...or anything. We talk about being "free" in ways they could never imagine. For them, freedom was a choice between who you were going to obey, and what it would cost you if you chose one ruler over another and the wrong one told you to do anything.

And down the street came a man who said he was a new King of a new time and a new people. He did not demand their allegiance; he asked for it. And he said that they would gain their lives by losing them for his sake. He has been teaching and healing and traveling for nearly three years, and - looking at it from the view of what it could cost you if you crossed the Pharisees or Pilot - this Jesus didn't have all that much to offer. But it would be interesting to watch through the week, to see if the new King was enough King to conquer. Then, there would be time to join the parade and shout "hosannas" with the few who had put themselves - and their lives - in the street.

We get this account after-the-fact. We know what the writers knew, – that Jesus did conquer, ...but not the way anyone thought he would. We get the story from the people who switched Kings because of the events of that week, ...the people who gave their lives to Jesus the Messiah raised by God from the dead, even though it was costing some of them their lives by the gloved-hand of power that had executed Jesus. Something in the difference of that man who rode a humble beast of burden and talked about serving others and giving all was worth the switch. After all, it was serve one King or another. He had said that we would be slaves of some power. And Jesus was a better King in the long run than all the Kings on horses who had ever gone before. We get the account - the story, the good news of the saving love of a God who is a servant King - from the people who sooner or later stepped into the street to follow the King on a donkey.

Here's my question this morning: Why didn't more people step into the street? I don't mean that Palm Sunday for the fiesta parade before the next weekend. But after the execution by crucifixion, and the empty tomb, and the appearances to lots of followers in different places over a couple of months, why didn't more of them decide to switch kings? ...to become slaves to a very different Lord?

Well, it's not that hard to imagine, ...because the reasons are the common reasons we share with the people standing on the curb that Palm Sunday morning.

They didn't know enough about Jesus to make the switch. They had heard great things, maybe even knew someone whose life that been altered – even saved – by a miracle. But they needed to know more before they would commit, so they waited and watched.

They didn't want the risk that switching kings would bring. Life might be difficult. There were demands and duties, stresses and pressures, hardships and unknowns. But at least they could see those coming without adding on to them, ...and adding God-only-knows-what might happen if they followed instead of just stood by and applauded.

They had too many commitments to commit to something else. The real trouble was not just saying yes to another thing, the adding to commitments. It was that Jesus would change their commitments, cause them to give up some things that he thought were less important than doing his work. And his work was not all that glamorous: feeding the poor, telling people about him, gathering for worship and study of the new life, helping others in the circle when difficulties came. Standing there watching, it made them wonder what was in it for them.

They were actually pretty satisfied on the whole, and there wasn't enough reason to switch now until they needed something he could give that they couldn't get elsewhere. They lived in the real world, with real demands and real life. Getting by and moving ahead was good enough for real living. Jesus had poured heart and soul and given up most everything to start a new movement toward a new life and a different world. And he was on a donkey with a few folk shouting “Hosanna” in the street. He still looked like a long-shot that day. And the truth is, he still looked like a real risk after the empty tomb when you thought about the other kings who were making demands on their time and taxes, their loyalties and loves.

We get this account of Palm Sunday after-the-fact. We need to remember that we get the good news of what happened that week from the people - the few who did more than wait and watch from the roadside. We get it from the ones who stepped out and followed. Today, we give thanks to all the ones who have followed, the ones who have committed to a Jesus they did not know well enough, the ones who took the risk of switching kings when others were making demands on their lives, the ones who did not let lesser commitments get in the way of commitment to the Lord who ask for their all and made good on his promises, the ones who had a good life but wanted a different and deeper life.

Today we give thanks to them. We realize that we are not here singing “hosanna” because Jesus rode down the street on a donkey. We are not here in a sanctuary confessing our faith that he is the Lord of earth and heaven - and our lives - because he died on a cross and God raised him from the dead.

Someone had to tell the story. Someone had to take the risk of what they could not know, and give up some things they knew. Someone had to make the commitment to continue the future that Jesus started in a new way for a new world. Someone had to live the life. We are here because of the people who did more than wait and watch. We are here because of the people who followed.

And *we* are the people who have taken the vow to be the followers in this time and for this place. If Northwood Presbyterian is going to celebrate Palm Sunday in a couple of generations, it will happen because we do more than wait and watch in this time. No church is some big organization with a surplus of people to get things done. Every church needs every person to contribute to the work and worship of the congregation. This church needs each person to commit to strengthening this congregation is its witness and ministry. Palm Sunday is not just palms and children. It is commitment to the King – here and now.

You have shown some great signs of love for each other and for Northwood Presbyterian Church in recent days. But you have also shown some signs that are deeply troubling. A Congregational Nominating Committee has reviewed your suggestions and prayerfully evaluated people for leadership. They have made good progress in the selection of a Pastor Nominating Committee, and we thank God for the people who have said they will serve. But they have also asked 11 people to serve one of 7 places of leadership needed on Session for the coming term, and *not one* person has said yes.

Speaking of Fiesta, we thank God for many people who give their effort and energy to the ministry and future of Northwood in all kinds of ways, including packing up the chairs after the parade and showing up at the church to unload when the clock is just turning to Palm Sunday. Some people have genuine burdens that keep them from being able to serve.

And some people may want to watch and wait until they see the real pastor before they commit. Some people think that commitments and work in former days are enough to retire and rest now. Some people have said “yes” to lots of things that are less important than their spiritual lives, and they are wondering why they feel so frantic and so empty of spirit. Some people

wonder about the risk involved in becoming more involved in the church. Some people think that are always other people at the church with more talent or more time or more money or more energy to serve, and the church will be fine when someone else steps out.

Some people have watched the people who have said “yes” and who have worked too hard and done too much and gotten discouraged and started coming to worship with a slight scent of a burnt offering - the ones who do too much because some do less than they could and are needed to do.

If there is ever a time for honesty in a sanctuary, it is the week that calls us to live holy lives. If there is ever a time to look at our own commitment, it is five days before a crucifixion. If there is ever a time to evaluate the risk that comes with the new life and new power and new direction if we just take the risk, it is one week before a tomb is empty and God has shown us that we can walk in the newness of Christ’s life *when* we follow him.

We are the people who have already taken the vow that Jesus Christ is Lord. We are the people who have already switched kings, who have already stepped out from the curb to follow. We are the people who know what happens after the crucifixion, who know what happens when generations of faithful followers pass on the commitment and keep the prayers and witness of the church moving into the future.

And we are the people who survey a cross and count our gains as losses, and know that if the whole realm of nature belonged to us it would not be enough to give back to the only King in response to the love we have received from a faithful Savior.

We are the people who are honest enough to confess that the only place you can sing “hosanna” is with the crowd of followers in the street!