Palm Sunday, March 23, 1986
THE JOURNEY TO JOY (No. 5 in a Series: On the Road with Jesus)
Luke 19:28-40

During this season of Lent, we have been looking at life as a journey and using the journeys of Jesus as a guide for our own lives. We have seen that as Jesus left home, so we also leave home, and that is not always easy. Then, as we travel life's journey, we need to be continually deciding what is necessary baggage and what is excess baggage. Some of us continue to carry the excess baggage of earlier conflicts still unresolved. Or we carry grudges, mistakes, old fears, and anxieties that should have been left behind. But there is also necessary baggage. We need to take with us forgiveness, openness to new ideas and new experiences. We need to take with us the desire to grow and mature, and the expectation that we will find God in unexpected places.

In our life's journey as we follow Jesus, there are highs and lows, mountaintop experiences, and valleys of need. No journey is completely smooth from beginning to end. Sometimes there are holding patterns and stopping places that we hadn't planned on, and we simply have to wait. And there are detours, changes of direction in our journey that we hadn't expected, and we find ourselves in a surprising place.

No life's journey is ever taken alone. There are always friends along the way. As I look back on my own life's journey, I can see that it is the friends that have frequently made the difference — that have turned my journey into joy. It has often been friends that have helped me change directions and friends who have carried me when I stumbled. It has also been friends who have educated me and corrected me. It's always more fun to travel with friends than to travel alone.

Some of life's journeys are festive and filled with celebration, while others are sad and lacking in hope.

This morning we are going to travel with Jesus on his last journey, and although the journey led in the end to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, it is at the same time a journey to joy.

We all have our favorite trips. Maybe it's the journey to the home we came from at Christmas or on some other holiday, or perhaps it's a journey to a chosen vacation spot that we have visited year after year. For the people in Jesus' time, it was the trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast, one of the most important holidays in the Jewish calendar. To truly celebrate it, one had to be in Jerusalem, just as to truly experience the Mardi Gras, one needs to be in New Orleans, or the October Fest, one needs to be in Munich.

Jesus and his disciples were going to Jerusalem. It was a long trip in those days. The eighty-mile journey south took them via the Jordan River valley to sunny Jericho, the last halting station for pilgrims from the north country who traveled to Jerusalem for the great Jewish festivals.

Since Jericho lay 825 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea, while Jerusalem was perched on the hilly backbone of Palestine some 2500 feet above sea level, Jesus' statement about going up to Jerusalem was quite literally true.

Undoubtedly, the roads leading up to Jerusalem were crowded since many other people were making the same trip to the festival. For a modern-day comparison, think of the roads leading to Lincoln on the Saturday of a home football game.

Jesus and his disciples were aiming for one of the eastern suburbs of Jerusalem, a little town called Bethany, which would serve as their lodging place and base of operations for the coming week. There were several important reasons for staying there rather than in the capital. For one thing, finding accommodations in the Holy City would have been next to impossible. Jerusalem, which normally had a population of 50,000, was at least tripling in size because of the vast influx of pilgrims celebrating the Passover, and the city was ringed with tents.

Jesus also had close friends in Bethany, and he could stay with them. From the village to the city of Jerusalem was scarcely half an hour's walk. Thus, the night before Palm Sunday, Jesus and his disciples stayed with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. He spent one of his last happy nights there at a dinner party given in his honor by his friends. It was at that party that Mary anointed his feet with some very expensive ointment in a gesture of worship and adoration, and that same occasion found Judas grumbling about the waste of it all, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the proceeds given to the poor?"

Then, on early Sunday morning, on what today we still call Palm Sunday, Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem. The word was out that he was coming, and expectations were high. Maybe here was the long-sought leader that could restore Israel to its rightful place among the nations. So, crowds started gathering early even in Bethany for a glimpse of the rabbi from Galilee. The triumphal procession was accompanied by shouting and singing from the throngs of people lining the sides of the road. They threw down their garments on the road to cushion his ride as well as taking palm branches and waving them.

The festivity accompanied Jesus along the entire route down the Mount of Olives, past the Garden of Gethsemane. They crossed the Brook of Kidron and entered Jerusalem, and still the crowds gathered and shouted.

For a present-day imperfect analogy of what it must've been like, think of it in these terms. Suppose the Nebraska football team had not had a winning season for more than twenty years. And then on the day of the first home game of a new season, the word was out that a new coach was going to restore the team to its former glory. This new leader would be entering the stadium, and as he came along the streets, the crowds began to shout and wave their big red banners.

But what did it all mean for Jesus? Had he arranged for the donkey because he was tired? Hardly. It was morning, and on other occasions, he was a tireless walker. It was a gesture of humility. The donkey was a common beast of burden of the time in contrast to the superior horse or gilded chariot used in Roman parades. Furthermore, the prophet Zechariah had foretold the arrival of the Messianic King in Jerusalem via this humble method.

Even though the crowd hailed him as a new liberator, surely Jesus knew that they had a different idea than he had of what kind of savior he was going to be. He was going to bring victory, but not the kind of victory the people had in mind. Yet he did not try to dampen or squelch their enthusiasm, even though some of his critics suggested that he tell the crowd to be quiet.

Rather, he let the celebration and the festivity continue. In fact, he went on to say, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” Sometimes enthusiasm and festivity should not be silenced, even though those engaging in the celebration may be partially mistaken in their understanding of what is going to happen.

This morning, on this Palm Sunday, we want to look more closely at the festivity of Jesus’ journey and in our own life’s journey as well. We want to ask and answer the question — why did Jesus want the festivity to continue even though he knew that in a few days most of the crowd would turn against him?

First of all, Jesus did not attempt to quiet the celebration because he knew that all of us need, in our life’s journey, times of festivity. Journeys to joy. There are times, as Jesus said, if we were quiet, the very stones would cry out. The Jewish religion and our Christian faith are filled with festivals and celebrations. It’s our way of expressing joy in God’s good creation.
One definition of festivity is this: “Festivity is a socially approved occasion for the expression of feelings that are normally repressed or neglected.” And all festivity, including religious festivals, has several essential ingredients. One of these is conscious excess. We “overdo” it on purpose. We live it up. We stay up later than usual; we shout louder, we eat more, we let ourselves go. Perhaps we laugh or cry or both. Sometimes we wear things that would be stared at curiously or disapprovingly on most occasions. Again, think of some of the unusual red clothing worn on football Saturdays.

The point is, festivity provides a short vacation from convention. Thus, on Palm Sunday, the people in a mood of celebration threw their garments on the road and tore palm branches from the trees. They were excessive in their enthusiasm.

Festivity is a way of saying “yes” to life. Jesus, in his own time, was known as a winebibber and a glutton. He liked festivals and parties.

There are all kinds of festivals. Sometimes we celebrate because of something that has happened, like a new job, or a diploma, or we may celebrate something that is still only hoped for. It may even be a celebration that occurs in spite of something that has happened or that is going to happen. Sometimes we need to affirm life. Despite the facts of failure and death, in fact, the ability to celebrate with real abandon is often found among people who are no strangers to pain and oppression.

Thus, I believe that Jesus knew that festivity and the joy which accompanies it is not only worthwhile in itself, it is absolutely vital to human life. Festivals enable us to relate ourselves to the past. They help us appreciate and enjoy the present, and they give us hope for the future.

The festival, the special time when ordinary chores are set aside while we celebrate some event, affirms the sheer goodness of what is. And festivals help us incorporate into our own lives the joys of other people and the experience of previous generations; the past, the present, and the future are all connected. In addition, festivals make us more aware of our connections with each other. Thus, another ingredient of festivity, in addition to excess, is that we celebrate with others. Have you ever tried to truly celebrate a festival all by yourself? In a time of festivity, you want and you need to be with others. Otherwise, it does not seem like a celebration.

Who wants to be all alone on Christmas? Or Thanksgiving? Or Easter? Or on your birthday? Or on the 4th of July? Festivals are, by their very nature, community activities and/or family celebrations.

Jesus knew that one's journey through life would be dull without festivity. That's why it is so universal in human life. We human beings are by our very nature creatures who not only work and think and sleep, but we are people who sing, dance, pray, tell stories, and celebrate!

No culture is without it. African Pygmies and Australian primitives frolic in honor of the equinox. Hindus revel at Holi. Muslims feast after the long fast of Ramadan. In some societies, the principal festival comes at harvest or when the moon reaches a particular position. In others, the anniversary of some event in the life of the culture or the nation supplies the cause for jubilation. All provide an occasion for singing old songs, saluting heroes, and reaffirming new and old aspirations. When festivity disappears from a culture, something universally human is lost.

Secondly, Jesus knew that all of us need festivity in our life's journey because it has a profoundly religious significance. The religious person is one who grasps his or her own life within a larger historical and cosmic setting. To be truly religious is to see ourselves as part of a greater whole, as part of the long history of the human race in which we now play a part. Festivity, with its songs, ritual, and story, connects us to our history. It places us somewhere between the beginning of creation and the end of history. Festivals give us a past and a future. For Jesus and his disciples and especially for those crowds along the road, the festival of the Passover recalled their history, their freedom from slavery in Egypt, and reminded them of God's continued presence with them all through history. It helped remind them of who they were, where they came from, and therefore gave them hope for the future.

There are festivals in our life's journey which are so important that as Jesus said, if we were to keep quiet, the very stones would cry out.

So in your journey through life, do not neglect the journeys to joy. Festivity is one of God's gifts to us. Festivity is not just a luxury in life. It provides the occasion for us to re-establish our proper relation to time, history, and eternity, our relationship to others, and most importantly, to God. Amen.