Palm Sunday, April 12, 1992
TEMPORARY TRIUMPHS
Luke 19:28-40

Our lives are filled with ups and downs, with exhilarating triumphs often followed by depressing failures, and the life of Jesus was no exception.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, his disciples treated him like a king. From all outward appearances, it was the high point of his brief ministry. He was getting the acclaim he deserved. Exactly what went on in the mind of Jesus during this brief demonstration, we shall never know, except that he made no attempt to discourage his followers. He accepted their accolades. However, some of the Pharisees in the crowd were not impressed but angry. They asked Jesus to order his disciples to stop the celebration. Jesus answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

He knew that demonstrations like this one cannot be arbitrarily ended. When people are in a celebrative and festive mood, it can’t be called off on command. Jesus also knew that occasions like Palm Sunday are temporary and will come to their own end.

Even though his disciples called him a king, we know that Jesus made no pretense to be a king in the usual sense of the word. He had no throne, no army, no perks, no servants. He wore no crown and did not carry a sword. He had no political ambitions whatsoever, and a few days later, when he stood before Pilate and Pilate asked him if he was King of the Jews, he tried to make clear what kind of king he was by saying, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

On the other hand, we also know that from the very beginning of his public ministry, people recognized in Jesus a certain quality. He exhibited a powerful spiritual presence. When he taught and spoke, people listened. They sensed in him a unique spiritual authority.

But again, not all people who came into contact with him were impressed in the same way. Many saw him only as another wandering preacher, a bit unusual, strange in his ideas, and they were certain that he would be forgotten in the next few years.

So Palm Sunday was a temporary triumph. That’s no surprise. Jesus had had temporary triumphs before. Some people said they would follow him and did for a while, but then fell away. He healed people, and they were impressed, but soon after, they forgot all about him. His life was filled with triumphs and defeats. Many people followed him gladly but misunderstood his teaching. Even his own family had their doubts, and the religious leaders of the day completely outlawed him from their circles. His own disciples did not quite catch on to what he was saying until after he had been crucified and then, a few days later, experienced him as their risen Savior. And one of his trusted disciples betrayed him.

How was it possible for Jesus to handle both his triumphs and defeats with such equanimity? And what can we learn from him in dealing with our temporary triumphs and passing defeats?

First of all, Jesus lived from the inside out. He knew what he stood for. He had a sense of what God’s will was for him in this life. And he had a prayer life that kept him constantly in touch with the source of all spiritual power — God. He also knew that this life is only temporary, but life with God after this life is eternal. He had a perspective.

I don't usually pay much attention to bumper stickers and refuse to allow any kind on my car. But sometimes I see one that impresses me. The other day I saw a bumper sticker that said, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

As I drove on, it made me think again about the things I stand for. Think about it. What are some of the principles on which you base your life? Our deepest convictions become a mirror of the values and priorities in our lives. "Choose your battles wisely!" an old friend who had been in the ministry for a long time told me years ago. "It isn't possible to fight for everything."

It has also been sarcastically said that "a conviction is that commendable quality in ourselves which we call bullheadedness in others." But on the positive side, we all know deep down that convictions are the mainsprings of action, the driving powers of life. They give us steadiness and direction. They help us to deal successfully with life's ups and downs.

Because of Jesus' deep conviction and his abiding faith in the power, goodness, and love of God, he could handle both temporary triumphs and passing failures. When people highly praised him, he did not become overly proud, and when they reviled him, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten; rather, his basic trust was based on the strength of his own inner character and in the power of God, who judges justly. He lived from the inside out.

If we are the opposite of Jesus and live from the outside in, then praise or any triumph gives us an overinflated feeling of elation, which usually doesn't last very long and only causes us to want more and more of it. Criticism and failure can depress us more than it should because it only confirms our own secretly shaky opinion of ourselves.

If we lack spiritual depth, which comes from a deep and abiding faith in God, then we let others determine whether we shall be rude or gracious, elated or depressed. We become "other-directed" people because our behavior is primarily based on how others are treating us, and we are no longer in charge of our own character.

The story of Palm Sunday reminds us that, like Jesus, our convictions — our inner life — need to be based on a strong and vital faith in God rather than having our inner worth depend on the opinions and approval of others or on life's temporary triumphs or defeats. We need to know that our worth and loveability are unrelated to others' approval or disapproval. God never intended us to be imprisoned by the narrow confines of others' opinions. The call to discipleship is a call to freedom, as we are released to move beyond our temporary triumphs, our present successes and failures, and future fears.

Secondly, Jesus was thankful and able to enjoy the celebration that took place on that first Palm Sunday, even though he knew it was temporary, because he knew at the same time that God and God's love are eternal and that God is not left without a witness at any time or in any place.
The world as we live in it continues to have its temporary triumphs and depressing failures, yet we need not give up hope. We know that God's ways are not our ways. Even though we live in a world where power politics, aggression, suspicion, hate, violence, and greed are still very much present, God's overall triumph is assured.

And in the meantime, we can see the temporary triumphs of our own time as little breaks of light in the darkness of the world. Sometimes they are seen in one person and at other times in a group or movement that brings change for the better into our lives.

Here's an example from church history: In the year 1210, a little man without a single possession in the world and without a penny to his name, but with an incredible spirit, stood before the Pope in Rome and asked for permission to begin what he wanted to call The Order of the Poor Little Brothers. Everybody told him when he went to Rome on this mission that it was hopeless, that the Pope would never consent to such an order, that there had never been such a society of Christian people based on anything like the severe requirements that the proposed order was to be based on, and that this little man, so stripped of all signs of power — this Italian from Assisi, standing before the Pope in his power and his majesty — would be completely lost and defeated before he began. But Francis of Assisi returned with his request granted. That was a time in the world and in the church of confusion and chaos, and yet there broke into the world and the church this singing, free spirit that had been captivated by Christ, and temporarily at least, triumphed over every power that was raised against it.

That kind of temporary triumph has been repeated again and again throughout the history of the world and the church, especially by people who live from the inside out.

But can these triumphs of Jesus be anything but temporary? Are we to be satisfied with these spotty, occasional triumphs of the spirit of Christ in the world?

From our limited perspective, the triumphs of God in our world may always seem to be only temporary, but I do know that God triumphs in individual lives over and over again, and that gives me hope.

I also know that these triumphs are more frequent than we sometimes think. What a list we could make if we had knowledge of all the ordinary men and women who, in the midst of confusion and the problems of everyday life, live in the spirit of Jesus and triumph over seemingly insurmountable problems. I think, for example, of a young woman, twenty-three years old, who has had an operation on her spine after months of suffering, with the future still uncertain, and yet she is so radiant and so full of life and faith as she lies there perfectly still, unable to move, and the people who go in to see her are inspired by her triumph of spirit.

These triumphs are more frequent than any of us can imagine, and every one of such triumphs offsets a hundred defeats. That, of course, does not minimize the seriousness of the defeats, but it is true that one such triumph does minimize the defeats that have surrounded us for years. In a similar way, one individual who does something because it is right and not because it will win an election will roll back the clouds of darkness for days to come. One person, no matter how obscure she may be, who is willing to let the spirit of Christ live in her — the spirit of goodwill and honesty — will offset a thousand defeats that scoundrels and rascals and sinners have made. And that one obscure person can be you if you will, like Jesus, live from the inside out. This is what gives me hope day after day.

And the foundation of all of our hope is this: In every triumph, whether it be temporary or longer-lasting, whether it be in a group, or in a movement for freedom, or in an individual, we see transparently the power of God at work, empowering the weak, scorning the powerful, healing the hurt. And this power of God is never temporary, but eternal and, in the long run, always triumphs. Amen.