Palm Sunday, April 9, 1995
JOURNEY TO TRIUMPH
Luke 19:28-40

It's been very helpful for me as a human being and as a follower of the Christian way to think of life on this earth as a journey. In using this metaphor, it's also been beneficial for me to understand God's Holy Spirit, as revealed most completely in Jesus, as my primary guide on my life's journey. As with all journeys, as I try to follow God's leading, there are mountaintop highs and valleys of doubt and despair. No journey is completely smooth from beginning to end. There are holding patterns and stopping places that I hadn't planned on, and I simply have to be patient and wait.

There are times when I feel lost and have to search or wait for new directions. And there are detours in my journey that I hadn't expected, and I find myself in some surprising and wonderful places. Furthermore, in my life's journey, as in yours, I sometimes encounter traveling conditions over which I have little control.

I've also discovered as I continue to travel life's journey that I tend to acquire things along the way, so I need to be continually deciding what is necessary baggage and what is excess baggage. There is the excess baggage of earlier conflicts that will never be resolved, and the unnecessary baggage of grudges, mistakes, old fears, and anxieties that should've been left behind long ago. This kind of baggage is heavy and takes a lot of energy to carry. It needs to be discarded.

At the same time, my necessary baggage includes taking with me a continual supply of unconditional love, suitcases filled with forgiveness, and other luggage overflowing with an openness to new ideas and new experiences. I also need to carry with me the desire to grow and mature and the expectation that I will find God in unexpected places. And the amazing thing is that this kind of baggage is never heavy and is easy to carry, and my supply can be easily replenished as I travel life's journey. In fact, the more love and forgiveness I give away as I travel, the more there is available.

I not only need God's Spirit as my guide and traveling companion, but I continue to discover that no journey in life need ever be taken alone. There are always friends who are a big help. Some have traveled with me most of the way; others I meet on my journey, and they travel with me for a time, and then they need to go their own way. As I look back on my life's journey, I can see that there have been friends along the way who have frequently made all the difference in the world. There are friends who have helped turn sadness into joy and despair into hope. There are friends who have given me directions and friends who have carried me when I stumbled.

There are friends, and sometimes enemies, who have educated me and corrected me. Furthermore, it's more fun to travel life's journey with others than to travel alone.

Some parts of my journey have been festive and filled with celebration, while others have been sad and lacking in hope. I'm sure your journey has been the same.

Today, I invite you to travel with me as we accompany Jesus on the last segment of His journey, which, though it led to His arrest, trial, and crucifixion, also ended with His resurrection, so it was above all a journey to triumph.

We all have our favorite trips. Perhaps it's the journey at Christmas or some other special occasion back to the place we came from. Or maybe it's a trip to a certain vacation spot that we have gone to year after year. For many of the people in Jesus' time, it was to go to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover Feast, one of the most important holidays in the Jewish calendar.

To truly experience the significance of this journey, one needed to be in Jerusalem, just as one needs to be in New Orleans to truly experience Mardi Gras.

It's a long trip on foot as we travel with Jesus and His disciples. The eighty-mile journey takes us along the Jordan River valley to sunny Jericho, the last stopping place for pilgrims from the north country who travel to Jerusalem for the religious festivals.

Since Jericho is 825 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea, while Jerusalem is perched on the hilly backbone of Palestine some 2,500 feet higher, the phrase "going up to Jerusalem" is quite literally true.

As we travel along, the roads leading up to Jerusalem are crowded, as many faithful people want to be there for the Passover. It's like the roads leading to Lincoln on the Saturday of a home football game.

Jesus and His disciples are heading for one of the eastern suburbs of Jerusalem, a little town called Bethany, which will be their stopping place and a place to stay for the coming week. There are several important reasons for staying here rather than in the city. For one thing, finding accommodations in the city would be difficult because of the many travelers wanting places to stay.

Jesus also has close friends in Bethany, and He can stay with them. It's only about a half-hour walk from this village into the city.

Upon arriving in Bethany, Jesus and His disciples were the guests of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. A dinner party was given in His honor. It was during that evening that Mary used the whole bottle of her most expensive perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus. Judas, one of the disciples, was present to complain about the waste of it all. Then, early on Sunday morning, on what we still call Palm Sunday, Jesus and His disciples made their way into the Holy City.

If you were listening closely to the story of this day as told by the Gospel according to Luke, you may have noticed that in his account, there's no reason to call today Palm Sunday. Luke says nothing about people waving palms or any kind of branches from trees. All he reports is that as Jesus rode along, His followers kept spreading their cloaks or coats on the road. Maybe we could call it "cloak or coat" Sunday.

Despite what the other Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — have to say about what happened, some kind of spontaneous demonstration developed along the way as Jesus rode on a donkey into Jerusalem. Luke implies that the cheers from the people came only from His followers and not from the general crowds that were in the city for the festival.

In this version of the story, these are not the people who later turn cold and shout that Jesus should be crucified. His disciples did not fully understand His messiahship, to be sure, but they did not scream for His death in the same week.

Not only does Luke not mention palm branches as the other Gospels do, but he also does not describe the crowds as shouting “Hosanna” or making any reference to David, the former King of Israel, trying to connect Jesus with him. Those kinds of things belong to parades and festivals with nationalistic overtones, and Luke remembers this event as having no such implications.

So, what do we learn from this part of Jesus’ journey, and what does it mean for us today in our journey?

First of all, even though some of His critics asked Jesus to quiet down His followers, He refused to do so. He said, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” Jesus knew that even though some of the enthusiasm for His ministry might be misplaced, this was not the time to try to correct it. That’s also why Jesus refused to be critical of Mary when she poured out all of her expensive perfume to anoint Him.
There are times in all of our lives when festivity and celebration should not be silenced, even though we who are engaging in them may be partially mistaken in our understanding of the event.

In our journey through life, we all need times of festivity and celebration. The Jewish faith and our Christian faith are filled with festivals and celebrations. It’s one way of expressing our joy in God’s good creation.

One definition of festivity is this: “Festivity is a socially approved occasion for the expression of joy that might otherwise be neglected.”

All festivals, including religious ones, have several essential ingredients. One of these is conscious excess. We “overdo it” on purpose. We break from our normal routine. 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 considered odd on most occasions. Think of some of the unusual red outfits worn on home football Saturdays.

On that day, the people, in a mood of celebration, threw their garments on the road. They were excessive in their enthusiasm.

Festivity is a way of saying “yes” to life. Jesus was described by His critics as being a winebibber and a glutton. He enjoyed parties and festivals. Life is filled with a variety of celebrations. Sometimes we celebrate because of something that has happened, like a new job or a graduation, or we might gather together to express our hope for something to happen. A funeral for a person who has died and lived a useful and loving life can be a celebration in the midst of our sadness and loss. In fact, the ability to celebrate with real abandon is often found among people who are no strangers to pain and oppression. It’s no accident that some of the most meaningful and joyful parties are found among poor people.

Jesus knew that festivity and the joy that accompanies it are not only worthwhile in themselves, but they are also absolutely vital to human life. Festivals help us to relate ourselves to the past. They enable us to appreciate and enjoy the present, and they give us hope for the future. Festivals are a way of remembering and reclaiming our life’s story. They are important stopping places in our life’s journey.

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, both religious and secular, help us incorporate into our own lives the joys of other people and the experiences of previous generations; the past, the present, and the future are all connected.

Festivals strengthen our connections with each other. They bind us together. Have you ever tried to celebrate some important occasion all by yourself? Who wants to be alone on Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, one's birthday, or the 4th of July? In a time of festivity, we want to be and need to be with others. Otherwise, it does not seem like much of a celebration.

Jesus knew that one's journey through life would be dull without festivity and celebrations. That's why it's so universal in life. We human beings are, by nature of God's creation, creatures who not only work and think and sleep but also celebrate.

No culture or religion 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 nation supplies the cause for jubilation. All provide an occasion for singing old songs, saluting heroes and heroines, and reaffirming new and old aspirations. When festivity disappears, so does the joy of life.

Secondly, Jesus knew that all of us need festivity in our life's journey because it helps keep us aware of our connection with God. The person who can celebrate is one who understands his or her life within a larger historical and cosmic setting. 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.
For Jesus and His first disciples, with their Jewish heritage, the festival of the Passover recalled their history, the freedom from slavery in Egypt, and it reminded them of God's continued presence with them through history. It helped them to remember who they were, where they came from, and therefore gave them hope for the future.

There are celebrations in our life's journey that are so important that, as Jesus said, if we were to keep quiet, the very stones would cry out. It's another way of saying that God's truth will always be heard. It cannot be stopped.

So in my journey through life and in yours, let us not neglect festivity and celebration. Such things are God's gifts to us. Amen.