

Riding Low

Psalms 118:1-2,19-20 (GNT); ¹ Give thanks to the Lord, because he is good, and his love is eternal. ² Let the people of Israel say, "His love is eternal." ¹⁹ Open to me the gates of the Temple; I will go in and give thanks to the Lord! ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord; only the righteous can come in.

I have a favorite Palm Sunday poem. Of course, it's my favorite, because I wrote it. There is a story that goes with this poem. A painting was given to the VAMC, by an accomplished Air Force veteran painter (names are changed, even though I have been given permission in writing in VA records – in this day and age, I believe everyone needs to respect more privacy). One day I was called by one of our social workers, who wanted to know if I would be willing to go visit a veteran who was marooned at his home with his medical disabilities. I had been doing a "Spirituality Group" for the social worker's unit every other week. My normal routine for the group was to take a poem that I had written and illustrated to use as an ice-breaking tool. In those days (2007), chaplains had to get special permission to leave the hospital to support out-patient veterans. I received permission and met the social worker at the veteran's home. I took the poem entitled "Seven Steps to Heaven" illustrated with a beautiful Daytona Beach sunrise, taken by my wife. We had a wonderful time talking about our spirituality and our world. In reality, our world was illustrated on every wall in his home by his realistic paintings. At the end of the session, he told me he had one request. He wanted to give me one of his paintings to show his appreciation. He explained that I could write a poem to go with the painting and bring the poem back for another visit. I explain to Greg that I was not allowed to accept gifts as a VA employee, but I could come back with a camera and take a picture of one of his paintings. The VA's Medical Media Service give me an old digital camera (remember this was 2007) with a floppy disc and no stabilizing capabilities. I went to Greg and Rosemary's house with the expectation of taking a picture to use in our next session. The floppy disc only held 4 shots and I failed to get a single usable picture thanks to the lack of stabilizing capabilities and my shaky Jake-like hands. Our Medical Media Service has always been about caring for our veterans, physically by taking medically necessary pictures, but also by supporting our veterans and staff in holistic ways. The Chief of Medical Media agreed to send one of the professional photographers to Greg's home with a "really" stable newer digital camera. The photographer was also an accomplished painter and he was so impressed by Greg's paintings that he took shots of 12 different paintings. One of Greg's paintings is a beautiful wildlife scene of ducks taking flight from their Florida pond sanctuary.

Taking Flight

Palm fronds never wave,
when stillness
paints the sky.

Silence is our portrait -
looking north and south
we form the opinion -
heaven's gate is closed
for the reason that,
wind does not waltz
from four corners
of the universe.

Branches begin to sway,
as wind blessings
canvas the land.

Hosanna is our cry -
joy springs east and west
we discover -
prayers always reach
heaven's gate.
"Save us, we pray"
escapes our lips
taking flight

For those of you who know me, when I tell a story, I usually try to use the same methodizing Jesus used when he told parables. You do realize that a lot of his parables were told by the Sea of Galilee, which in my mind, makes them sea stories. For the rest of the story I want to tell it like it is happening as I write. Time has passed and I am working on the last painting. It has been an amazing experience for me as a caregiver to see the spiritual blessing of sharing our lives

and our creative works together. There was a reason this painting of a shrimp boat going into the sunrise is the last one that I chose to write a poem about. I'm allergic to shellfish like shrimp and have had 2 life-threatening allergic reactions called anaphylactic shock from shellfish. One was on my submarine in the Navy, back during Vietnam, and one was during the time I have been serving as a chaplain here at the Malcom Randall VAMC. Here is the poem surrounding the picture of the painting:

Daylight

Day dawns with a bow of God's paradise –
a time to explore the excitement of life!

Do not let highlife, midlife, or lowlife create a crisis –
causing wildlife or strife!

Let the light excite and delight your life
with an invite to recite healing hindsight!

For the sun sets with jubilation for those
who pray to make each day a better day,
"Lord help me make today a better day than yesterday!"

I called Rosemary, Greg's wife, with excitement. I told Rosemary that I had finished the last poem and couldn't wait until next Tuesday to share it with Greg. It got quiet on the other end of the telephone line and then Rosemary told me that Greg's body was shutting down physically at Haven Hospice in Lake City. I received permission to drive to Lake City and was by Greg's bedside before the morning was over. Greg was awake and I shared the poem and the picture. He smiled and expressed how thankful he was for the poems and all our time together. I said a prayer and Rosemary and I walked outside the room. We were still sitting together talking, minutes later, when the hospice nurse came out and shared that Greg had passed away. It was like that last poem and picture of his painting gave him permission to take flight and fly away to Heaven's Gate. Psalm 118:19-20 tell us the gate is wide open to those who are righteous – in other words, spiritually connected to God.

Lowriders

You can't help noticing the car, brightly painted with a "statement" design decorating its slow-moving chassis. The lowriding car wants you to see it coming and the slower it goes the more time it has to make an impression on you. You may also hear the hissing sound of the hydraulics as air is released to help the car go as low as it can go. The driver behind the wheel behind also likes to be called a "Lowrider."

People love a parade. It might be a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, New Years Day Rose Bowl Parade or an October University of Florida Gator Homecoming Parade (surely, you didn't expect me to leave the Gators out). After the hard years of WWII, Mexican-Americans started drawing attention to their culture by creating low-riding cars that they could drive low and slow through the streets of Los Angeles. A wave of prejudice followed quickly attacking the low-riding culture. Laws were enacted to curb the phenomenon, but creative ingenuity won out in the end. Today lowriders can be seen all over the country and have even spread to Japan. The art of expression through many different "car cultures" exists today. People have different opinions, and some opinions can be helpful for bringing God's people together and some can be harmful, tearing God's people apart. Some people on the sidelines of a parade love to cheer, while others prefer to jeer.

Riding Low

Matthew 21:1-11 (GNT): ¹ As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. There Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead ² with these instructions: "Go to the village there ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied up with her colt beside her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ And if anyone says anything, tell him, 'The Master needs them'; and then he will let them go at once."

⁴ This happened in order to make come true what the prophet had said:

⁵ "Tell the city of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you!
He is humble and rides on a donkey
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

⁶ So the disciples went and did what Jesus had told them to do: ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on. ⁸ A large crowd of people spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches

from the trees and spread them on the road.⁹ The crowds walking in front of Jesus and those walking behind began to shout, "Praise to David's Son! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise be to God!"¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into an uproar. "Who is he?" the people asked.¹¹ "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee," the crowds answered.

Imagine you have been taken by a time-machine from the sidelines in Los Angeles in the 1950's to the sidelines of a parade at Jerusalem's Gate on the Sunday morning after the Sabbath. It's thirty plus years after King Herod ruled. Word has gotten out that Jesus was going to Jerusalem. People from the villages neighboring Jerusalem, were making a pilgrimage to the Temple. They had been following Jesus along the paths of Galilee, where he taught them in a sermon on a mountain. They had been following Jesus when he gave sight to the beggar who was blind from birth. They shared stories about Jairus and his daughter. They marveled at the resurrection of Lazarus, Martha and Mary's brother. Now, they would get to see him again, as he entered the Holy City for Holy Week. A celebration atmosphere was in the air and they were ready for a parade.

At every parade, you have some on the sidelines who are there to celebrate, some who are not ready to celebrate, some who are curious and some with attitudes that can be harmful, tearing God's people apart. When you see the giant balloon comic character coming towards Macy's at Herald Square, you will hear excitement from those who love the character flying by, but you will also hear complaints from people who are offended by some of the characters represented. When you see a rose-colored float go by in Pasadena filled with the beauty of God's flowers, you will hear the oos and the aahs of those touched by nature's wonders, but there will be those who complain about the cost of the celebration. Remember two-thousand years ago, Judas Iscariot who said,⁵ "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" (John 12:5). I won't bring up the example of the University of Florida's Gator Homecoming Parade – Wait, what do I hear from the "courtroom sidelines," someone in a "Go Dogs" t-shirt shouting out "Objection, your Honor" simply because I chose to mention a Gator Parade again.

Now that I have your attention, take that time-machine journey back with me to a manger (on a morning we call Christmas morning) on an ordinary day in an ordinary time. If it hadn't been for the angels in the "midnight clear" sky singing, "Peace on the earth, goodwill to men" there would not have been anyone to celebrate Jesus's birth but the cows, sheep, goats, ducks, chickens and Joseph's lowly donkey (note: I left out pigs). But the angels directed the shepherds to the stable manger to celebrate Jesus's birth. No one else was paying attention except the Magi who were almost two years away by "camel express." They were paying attention to the Bethlehem Star. What a parade the three Magi on their camels must have been! No one seemed to notice the carpenter's son in the little village of Nazareth, that is until his parents left him at the Temple when he was twelve:⁴¹ "His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.⁴² And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast.⁴³ When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it;⁴⁴ but supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances.⁴⁵ So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him.⁴⁶ Now so it was *that* after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.⁴⁷ And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers.⁴⁸ So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, 'Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously.'⁴⁹ And He said to them, 'Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?'⁵⁰ But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them (Luke 2:41-50, NKJV). It is ironic, that people could be astonished by Jesus's understanding and answers but wouldn't even be concerned about his well-being. I believe I would have noticed that a twelve-year-old boy camped out at my church, but it appears like the only ones paying attention to Jesus were his parents.

You may ask, "What does this have to do with Palm Sunday?" Let's continue the same journey we have been on from Jesus's birth through his Passover visit when he was twelve to this Passover visit. Now we are standing on the sidelines seeing the excitement around us and also hearing the complaints from people who don't know or understand "this Jesus." This is the Sunday of a unique Holy week, one that has become sacred to Christians as well as to those of the Jewish Faith. The Gospel Scripture writers have slight variations in their reporting of Jesus's donkey ride through the city gates. However, Jesus riding low on the donkey's colt is not a variation. It is important to remember Joseph's donkey at the lowly Christmas manger in the beginning of Jesus's salvation journey. For me, the donkey's colt on Palm Sunday was symbolic of the reason for our Messiah – to save us from ourselves and the habit we had throughout salvation history of being "foolishly majestic," as we continually separated from God. In the sideline comments on that Sunday morning, you might hear a complaint from a Zionist, like Judas Iscariot, commenting that a real Messiah would choose to show his might against the Romans by riding high on a majestic white horse. Thank God Jesus listened to, and was guided by, the

Spirit's prophecy. In my life, I have seen time and time again, that the direction of God's plan goes far beyond our wildest imagination. So, what if? What if Joseph's donkey that brought Mary to the inn with no room, only a lowly stable out back was a "DNA" ancestor of the donkey's Palm Sunday colt?

That's enough donkey talk, but what about the sideline commentary variations? Matthew 21:9-11(NKJV) has the sideline crowd shouting another supportive phrase:

⁹ "Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying:
 'Hosanna to the Son of David!
 Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Hosanna in the highest!'

10 And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, 'Who is this?'

11 So the multitudes said, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.'"

Can you hear the different shouts of praise and celebrations begin to echo in the walls of Jerusalem's gate?

Mark, the writer of the earliest Gospel hears almost an angelic chorus to the one Matthew heard (Mark 11:9-11, NKJV):

⁹ Then those who went before and those who followed cried out, saying:
 'Hosanna!

Blessed *is* He who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed *is* the kingdom of our father David

That comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

¹¹ And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple. So, when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve."

I have shared the other gospel accounts because I want to conclude this sermon with the Gospel writer, Luke, the physician's commentary of the triumph entry to the Gate of Jerusalem (Luke 19:37-40, NKJV):

³⁷ "Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, ³⁸ saying:

 'Blessed *is* the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

 Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'

³⁹ And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, 'Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.'

⁴⁰ But He answered and said to them, 'I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out'."

We have looked at the Scripture's record of the different sideline comments – we will rightly call them songs of praise! But Luke also includes commentary (Luke 19:39-40, NKJV): ³⁹ "And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, 'Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.' ⁴⁰ But He answered and said to them, 'I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out'." Those words of Jesus were always written in red in my Grandmother Busby's Bible. I will remember it always, on the marble-top (stone) table next to her elegant antique sofa. – And it's crying out to me now, as Jesus Christ, my Lord and my Savior holds my heart and my soul in His hands. I will inspire you so that you can hope for better days – and O God, during these pandemic days, we need your "Blessed Assurance" of better days tomorrow!

New Hope

Tomorrow will be a better day,
because I will borrow the good
from yesterday.

I will carry the best forward
with my helping hands
to create a red-letter day.

You see,

It is about the inspiration
you have planted within me.
That is worth saving.