

What's So Triumphant?
John 12:9-19

Palm Sunday begins the weeklong adventure of living at the church. This isn't a bad thing but rather a wonderful opportunity to participate in Jesus' story of salvation, hope, and experiencing God's presence. The events of this week help us travel to a time in which life was very different. However, as we hear their story we recognize some of the same concerns and struggles; but we are also given a new perspective in solving these dilemmas. The message today is the beginning of a mini-series that will end on Easter morning. I invite you to join with us in discovering how God will help us find the answers we need to be the church God calls us to be for the world.

Our journey begins with the Pharisees and other Religious Leaders who are stressed about how to keep their members focused on the obedience to the church laws and traditions. Daily people gathered around Jesus listening to his stories and watching him heal people. For the past three years, Jesus had been traveling from city to city with God's chosen people following with excitement and enthusiasm. The Religious leaders knew the Jews were facing a huge decline in their attendance because of one man's magnetic charm. Sound familiar? While we can understand the

Pharisees concern for the church, we also recognize that what Jesus offered had (and still has today) greater depth and meaning for the people.

Our story continues with Jesus entering Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. However, Jesus enters with the tickertape parade of a great King or military general who has just won the war. Why such fanfare? In order to understand, there are a few details leading up to this event that illuminate for us the reason for such a triumphal entry. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the story of Jesus turning the tables in the Temple precedes this entry. These writers believed this explosion of Jesus' anger was the final straw. In the eyes of the Pharisees and Religious Leaders, Jesus' claiming of "My Father's house" declared Jesus' act as blasphemous. Jesus had gone too far and it was now time to rid the world of this sacrilegious man. John, however, added another view of the Pharisees and Religious leaders' anger.

According to John, Jesus had been at Bethany where the people were mourning Lazarus' death. Lazarus was a man of integrity in the community. He was well known and the announcement of his death was an unexpected shock to the community. In John's story, four days had passed since Lazarus was laid in the tomb. Mourners were still lingering at

Lazarus' grave. (It was believed in those days that the spirits of the dead remained close to the grave for three days as a way of bringing comfort to their loved ones.) Jesus arrived and life changed when he commanded Lazarus to come out from the tomb. The raising of Lazarus from the dead was proof that Jesus was more than a healer and great prophet. Lazarus was a walking billboard testifying that Jesus was the Messiah. This was not seen as something good by the Pharisees and Religious Leaders.

John's story continues to unfold as we listen to the voices of the Pharisees and Religious leaders vent their anger. Instead of trying to understand Jesus' teachings they became defensive. Their first thought was to destroy Lazarus which would get rid of the proof of Jesus' power. They also knew it was past time to eliminate Jesus, but how? As long as there was peace, the Romans allowed them to be the authority for Jerusalem. However, at the first sign of trouble the Romans would take away their power. Now the crowds around Jesus had become so grand they prevented the Religious Leaders from making any false accusations toward Jesus. For the time being they chose to sit back and watch as Jesus entered the Holy City. What they saw added to the anger and

frustration. Jesus did not walk into the city as most people. Instead he chose to ride into the city as though he was a King; but king of who?

Jesus came to Jerusalem like all the other Jews, to celebrate the Passover. It was a Jewish tradition that at least once in their life every Jew would celebrate this festive day in Jerusalem. It was not uncommon for the population of Jerusalem to triple or quadruple for this one event. This year even more gathered bringing at least 2.5 million people to the celebration. What was the great attraction? News had quickly spread of Jesus' greatest miracle of all, raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus brought with him a large crowd from Bethany and many from the city came to see this miracle worker. The only ones not excited were the Pharisees and Religious leaders.

In the Gospels, we read that it was Jesus' decision to ride a donkey as he entered the city. This intentional act gave the Pharisees and Religious Leaders fodder for their charge against Jesus. In this culture only royalty used donkeys to ride as a sign they were coming in peace. The Pharisees and the Religious Leaders viewed this as Jesus claiming he was King of the Jews, Prince of Peace, which constituted blasphemy in their eyes. They also saw this act as Jesus directly challenging their authority.

The crowds shouted their "Hosanna's" and waved their palm branches claiming Jesus as their new ruler so where did that leave the Pharisees and Religious Leaders? What they forgot was this act was Jesus fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." This was more proof that Jesus truly was the Messiah. The Pharisees and Religious Leaders refused to look beyond their traditions recognizing that the one they had been looking for had finally arrived.

What the Pharisees and Religious Leaders saw as a challenge was a very courageous act on Jesus part. Jesus knew riding in on the colt meant the end of his earthly life was coming soon. He knew the Pharisees and Religious Leaders were watching and waiting for the opportune time to turn the people against him. Now it was time to teach the world what is most important in following God. Unbeknownst to them, in the next few days the Pharisees and Religious Leaders help the people move from worshipping Jesus the human to worshipping God the Almighty. Jesus has already brought the people from the temple building into the world, but now the challenge is to help them find their own conversation directly with God.

What the Pharisees failed to realize was the attendance was dropping because the people needed more than rules to obey and traditions to follow. Jesus had given them an opportunity to rekindle their spirits with God's love, grace, and mercy. Today people are searching for more than traditions and rules of the church to follow. Traditions and laws are tools we use to tell the world we belong to God, but there is more to the story. We come to worship to speak with God face to face and to listen to God's voice; not out of obligation or ritual. God has more to share with us once we get past the fanfare and listen intently to God's voice.

This week God is calling us to come to the traditions of Holy Week and experience firsthand how God's grace, mercy, and love are expressed. Come open your ears to hearing God's voice. Come open your see God's face. Come open your heart for God's spirit to grace your life. When you truly experience God you can't wait to tell the world with your excitement and enthusiasm. Our other alternative is to come out of obedience and obligation but what message does that send to the world. People are searching for God. How can they find God here with us at the Denison UMC? Amen.