

I Love A Parade

Palm Sunday 2023

Back in September of 2020, I was down at the Fire Station on Reef Road,

where I'd been asked to offer a prayer at the annual 9/11 service there.

Afterward, our Fire Chief and a couple of the Assistant Chiefs pulled me aside and asked to have a word with me,

which was slightly terrifying.

Had I prayed poorly?

Did they know that it had been a little while since I'd checked my smoke alarm batteries?

But no, it was actually something extremely cool:

it was them asking me if I'd like to serve as Fairfield's Fire Chaplain.

And before I'd even gotten the "oh yeah" out of my mouth,

they jumped in to say

"and of course you get a uniform too."

So now it was "oh *double* yeah."

Which is why, a week later, I found myself in a huge warehouse on Connecticut Avenue in Bridgeport, surrounded by racks and racks of firefighter and police uniforms, as a very kind salesperson worked with me to figure out a uniform that would fit me –

let's face it, a 5 foot almost 2 inch woman is not their typical firefighter.

But we figured it out, and the uniform now hangs in my closet, and some of you have seen me in it over these past couple years.

Truth is, there's not a lot of call to wear it,

but when there is, I get very excited.

I guess I haven't hidden that excitement very well,

because when I got a call from the Chief's office in May of 2021,

this is what they said:

“Alida, want to be in the Memorial Day Parade? You get to wear your uniform!”

“I'm there,” I said.

And so it was that I got to march in my first parade since fourth grade, back in my Girl Scout days.

I won't lie –

walking down the Post Road on Memorial Day with Fairfield's Bravest and a big red firetruck – that was a thrill.

People wave at you.

They cheer.

Okay, so granted, they were actually cheering for the men and women I was walking with,

but still. There was cheering.

And every block or so, one of you would recognize me and yell "Alida!" and yes, that too was a thrill.

Honestly, just being at a parade again was fun – you know that.

The marching bands! The floats that people have worked so hard on!

The guys in those funny little cars!

Who doesn't love a parade.

Last Sunday morning at 9:00,

I was over in the Memorial Room with our Church School kids. Something they've taken to doing lately is practicing the hymns that we sing together in church, so that when they're with us here for Church First Sundays, they are ready to belt out the songs.

So last Sunday, we were all gathered around the piano in the Memorial Room, with Sara Hoefler at the keyboard, to practice 'All Glory Laud and Honor', our first hymn here today. And I figured that first I'd better explain what this song was about, and what the heck it means to laud someone.

"Okay, kids", I said, "this song is about the day Jesus came to Jerusalem, and there was this big parade."

And one of the kids said, "wait, Jesus was in a parade?"

"Yes," I said! "A parade!"

And she paused, and wrinkled up her forehead and said,

"What float was he on?"

“Ah,” I said, “he was not actually on a float.

He rode in on a donkey.”

Another pause.

“A donkey??” said another kid. “Did you say a donkey?”

And it occurred to me in that moment

that that was probably *exactly* what the kids in the crowd

in Jerusalem two thousand years ago said to their parents, too.

And it’s probably exactly what the parents themselves were saying.

Because here’s what people were expecting:

Fire Trucks.

Or whatever the Jerusalem Year 33 AD equivalent would have been.

Fire Trucks and floats.

Fire Trucks, floats, fireworks,

something big.

Anything big.

Because they were expecting – the Messiah.

You know, the Messiah? Son of David? King of Kings?

The word had reached Jerusalem that this man Jesus was the one they'd been waiting for.

He'd been drawing crowds everywhere he went, they heard; he wasn't afraid of anyone, they'd heard, and that's what they needed.

It was Jerusalem in the year 33,

and the people of Israel had been under Roman occupation for a long time now,

yearning for rescue,

desperate for someone to give them their country back.

And when they thought Messiah,

they pictured, well, a big shot.

a guy riding in on a float with trumpets blaring

and sirens going and fireworks in the background.

And yeah, a uniform wouldn't hurt.

But now here he was.

The people had turned out in big numbers because the word had spread,
and hopes were running high.

The crowds were shouting *Hosanna, blessed is the Messiah, blessed is the one who comes in God's name.*

And in the midst of it:

a guy on a donkey, dressed kinda poorly, head bowed, quiet.

No float for this guy,

no uniformed company marching alongside him.

Just this quiet, humble, lowly figure moving slowly forward through the crowds.

On a donkey. What any peasant would travel on. A donkey.

Oh boy.

This was not what they'd expected.

What kind of Savior was this?

Whose Messiah was this?

What happened then was that some of those palm waving folks went away disappointed.

Tossed their palms on the streets and headed home,
annoyed at themselves for falling for the hype,
ready to wait for the next Messiah candidate to come along.

Those were probably the same people who, five days from now, weren't too surprised when they heard this Jesus guy was going to be executed for impersonating a King.

They probably shrugged and figured he got what was coming to him.

But then there were the others.

The others who saw this man on a donkey,
a man like them,
and who knew, who *knew*, that he was there for *them*.

The ones who knew that this man with no float and no trumpets was exactly who they had been waiting for.

Jesus showed up in Jerusalem not at the head of a parade,

not on a float, not with marching bands,
but in just the same way that he had always shown up to people.

I might have loved marching in a parade.

But Jesus? not so much.

He was not a razzle-dazzle Messiah.

He had no interest in riding into town on a white horse, with trumpets
blaring from the heavens.

And he never did.

He entered into people's lives quietly.

He was a Messiah who walked from town to town.

He stopped whenever he saw someone in need;

that's how he ended up healing a blind man begging by the side of the
road;

that's how he found himself in the company of lepers desperate to
cured.

Traveling through one town —

no parade, no fanfare —

Jesus fell into conversation with a woman drawing water from a well and talked to her for ages, in a way that no one ever talked to women. He stopped in the town square to laugh with children, which no one ever did,

he wandered into the home of the town pariah, ate dinner with him, listened and forgave him.

That's what Jesus did, that's how he loved and how he taught love: no parade, just quietly entering in, no fanfare, just finding the ones who needed him, just doing the work of love.

Quietly, lovingly, patiently,

Jesus entered into people's lives the same way he entered into Jerusalem:

with humility and gentleness.

He wasn't interested in having people worship him;

he was interested in showing people how to love one another.

Today, Palm Sunday,

we're here to remember who it is *we* follow.

Who is this man Jesus,

the one we wave our palms for,

the one we follow down the street and into Jerusalem?

And what we remember today is that we follow a man who came into town on a donkey, not a float.

Who came to quietly do the work of love

wherever it was needed and without fanfare.

And so that's what we are called to do.

And all over this world, there are people who are doing just that.

Last week after worship,

Roni Widmer and I told stories of our travel to India in January, and showed pictures.

And photo after photo was of people who are quietly, daily, lovingly, doing the work of faith:

the teacher in a slum school who stays late every day to help her girl students learn;

the mother of a disabled child who opened her home to care for kids just like hers;

the couple who cook up a great vat of rice every day for the orphaned elderly of their village.

They are all, each one of them, followers of a gentle Messiah.

And in their presence, Roni and I were reminded of what it means to be his people.

Last year at this time, we had another reminder of what it means to be his people,

what it means to follow a Messiah who just wants us to show up and to love.

Last year at this time, thousands of Ukrainian refugees were streaming across the borders,

women and children and the elderly,

carrying all that they could carry,

exhausted and fearful.

And you remember how many people rushed to the borders to welcome them.

How many came to set up tents and to make soup,
to carry their bags and to find them homes.

Two of our own were there,
two of our own Greenfield Hillers, Ford and Bill.

Both of them went to join the work of love that was being done there,
and when they returned, they told us what they had done.

Ford held hands with children as they walked the final mile into
Poland,
shepherded them through.

Bill drove supplies to the orphanages of Lviv, Ukraine
back and forth across the border with food and diesel and whatever
was needed,
and taking time to play silly games with kids who'd seen too much, too
young.

Each of them, when they came back, protested to us that they had only
done what anyone would do,

but the truth is that they both did the work of love
as Jesus showed us to do it:

Quietly, without fanfare, getting it done.

and show the world what it means to follow faithfully and lovingly.

And I could tell story after story up here
about what is being done in his name, the man who arrived without a
float.

I could tell story after story up here about what you are doing —
all of you who show up where love is needed and give it,
who don't want a lot of fuss, but just do it —
care and cook and hug and lead and tutor and fix and call and write
and pray and love and love and love.

Let's face it:

on that first Palm Sunday,
a quiet carpenter riding on a donkey
was maybe not who people expected to see.

It maybe wasn't quite the parade they had in mind,
and he maybe wasn't exactly the King of Kings that they had in mind.

But for those who opened their hearts to him,
who followed Jesus down the road,
they discovered what true salvation looks like.

This week, this holy week,
those who followed this quiet Messiah through the streets of Jerusalem
saw the work of salvation:
they witnessed healing offered to all who were hurting,
they saw welcome given to the overlooked and the outcast,
and they saw love poured out without limit, all the way to the cross.

This week, this holy week,
we remember who it is we follow:
that same gentle man,
who offers us salvation,
and who calls us to love as he loved.
To love as we ourselves have been loved.

Hosanna! Amen.

