

“Many People Spread Their Cloaks”

Mark 11:1-11

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As I read through the traditional Palm Sunday story, a question arises: **WHAT WOULD CAUSE LOTS OF PEOPLE TO REMOVE THEIR CLOAKS AND LAY THEM DOWN ON THE ROAD AS JESUS APPROACHED ON A DONKEY?**

It seems like a strange gesture. So, what do these people in the crowd know or believe that causes them to offer such a dramatic welcome? To answer this question, I put myself into that crowd, and I listened, as if I were a newspaper reporter, to what they were saying. Some were shouting. Some were whispering. Everyone was talking with animation. So, here is what I heard in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday morning as people, one after another, covered the road with their cloaks.

There was one woman in the crowd who said Jesus had made her feel valued for the first time in her life. Everyone else had brushed her off; passed her by; hadn't bothered giving her the time of day. But this Jesus was different. He saw in her what no one else had seen, that she was somebody; that she had been made in the very image of God; that even though she had no visible means of support, he regarded her with respect and with dignity. She said she had been wondering why she had been born, and this Jesus guy had helped her to find a purpose in life. He had taught her to pray. He had helped her to find her voice for speaking her mind, not just to God, but to her neighbors as well.

She had taken off her outer cloak and spread it on the path as a sign of her gratitude. Gratitude! That's what her cloak symbolized. For she had been utterly lost, and was found; had been blind to the goodness of life, but now could see her own worth. "Thank you, Jesus," she cried out! Others were shouting, "Hosanna!" but she was shouting, "Thank you, Jesus!" For her, Palm Sunday was a Thanksgiving Day!

There was a man in the crowd who had taken off his royal blue cloak, the one he wore for special occasions; royal blue, the color reserved for royalty. I watched him carefully stretch it out across the roadway so it would cover the full width of the road. And I overheard him declare that this Jesus on the donkey had become the ruler of his heart, the sovereign of his soul.

While we were waiting for the donkey to come by with Jesus, he told me about the ancient rift that had existed between him and his brother. They hadn't spoken in twenty years. There had been an unfortunate incident, and they had ignored each other ever since. They had longed to find a way to be re-united but neither knew how to take the first step. This fellow along the road said they both happened to be in the same crowd one day when Jesus was teaching down by the Sea of Galilee. The topic was forgiveness and reconciliation. At the end of the lecture, everyone went home except for my brother and me. We stood there at the water's edge too stunned to move. Jesus walked over to us; didn't say a word; took my hand and placed it on my brother's shoulder; took my brother's hand and placed it on my shoulder. The rest was up to us. We hugged. And we forgave. And we vowed never to let anything come between us again.

What I heard this man in the crowd say was this: “Jesus opened my heart that day. He opened both our hearts. We think of him now as the ruler of our hearts; the sovereign of our souls. So, when I heard Jesus would be coming into the City today, I brought along my royal blue cloak just in case I had a chance to lay it at his feet!”

What started out as an ordinary day turned into a most memorable day. That woman shouting ‘thank you Jesus,’ and that man with the royal blue cloak, they amazed me.

But neither amazed me as much as the child who seemed to be there along the parade route unattended. I didn’t see a mom or a dad anywhere near by. Just the kid. And the child wasn’t shouting or singing or saying anything. It’s what the lad did that caught my attention. He had managed to wiggle his way into the front row. He had what looked like a brown paper bag. As Jesus passed by, that youngster reached into his sack, pulled out a sandwich and handed it up over the saddlebags right into the hand of Jesus.

Jesus pulled on the reins to halt the donkey. He accepted that sandwich. He took a big bite right there in front of the crowd. The boy had the biggest smile on his face! The only one there with a bigger smile was Jesus himself. And that’s when the amazing thing happened. No one in the universe could have predicted such a thing. Jesus reached down and pulled that child up onto the saddle. There they were, face to face. In that moment, the attention of the whole world shifted from Jesus to the little boy. Like a loving grandpa, he lifted that child right up into the air, above his head!

It was as if Jesus were drawing attention to the child’s generosity. It was as if he were saying to each one of us in the crowd, ‘turn and be like this innocent one, for it is this kind of spontaneous generosity, this kind of unconditional love, that opens the gate to the Kingdom of God.’

When Jesus set the child back down to the ground, folks in the crowd were no longer shouting, 'Hosanna.' They were opening their picnic baskets and sharing what they had with each other! I felt I was witnessing a miracle.

But over beyond the crowd, by the marketplace, I could see the local officials were not smiling. They were scowling. They were not shouting 'Hosanna,' they were shouting threats. They were not opening their picnic baskets; they were opening their handcuffs. They were not celebrating a victory; they were plotting a demise. It all stood as such a stark contrast. Out by the road, the crowd had placed their cloaks on the ground as a sign of welcome. By the marketplace, the local authorities had rolled up their sleeves as a sign of impending doom.

I tell you, that first Palm Sunday lives in my heart as a turning point. I knew that day there would be no turning back, no turning back. I knew I would be in for the long haul, no matter what the cost. And to this day, I have not regretted my decision to follow Jesus all the way to the cross and beyond. Thus, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.