

# Palm Sunday

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
March 24, 2013

## **Luke 19:28-40**

The book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, written by Tracy Kidder, is the biography of a man named Paul Farmer. Farmer grew up in rural poverty in the deep South, but went on to attend Duke University and then Harvard Medical School. Today he divides his time between Harvard where he teaches and central Haiti, where he operates a hospital. In the book, there is a moment when Farmer is reflecting on the dilemma of living such a divided life – teaching at a place like Harvard where most everyone is successful, and practicing medicine in Haiti, where most everyone is desperate. He recalls when an emaciated young man was flown from Haiti to Boston for emergency surgery with funds raised by Farmer's non-profit organization. In spite of everyone's heroic efforts, eventually the young man died.

Some of Farmer's own staff members questioned if this was an appropriate use of so much money – approximately twenty thousand dollars – when the man's condition was so grave. Could the money have been better spent? Reflecting on that concern, Farmer responds, "There are so many ways of asking that question. For example, why didn't the airline company that makes money pay for the flight? That's a way of asking it. Or how about this way? How about if I say, I have fought for my whole life a long defeat. How about that? How about if I said that all it adds up to is defeat? I have fought the long defeat and have brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I'm not going to stop just because we keep losing. I actually think that sometimes we may win...I'm not complaining. You know, people from our background, we're used to being on the victory team, and actually what we're trying to do here is to make common cause with the losers. Those are two very different things. We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers? No, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat."

"The long defeat" – not a bad description of some of my not so good days of fishing! But it actually comes from Farmer's favorite book – *The Lord of the Rings*. The elfin queen, Galadriel, says, "Through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat." And Galadriel, of course, had sprung from the vivid imagination of JRR Tolkien, who once wrote, "I am a Christian...so I do not expect history to be anything but a long defeat – though it contains some samples or glimpses of final victory."

It all leads me to wonder what exactly we are doing in our Palm Sunday celebration. Are the palms and parade, the music and the Hosannas, simply expressions of our engagement in a cause, a struggle, which is ultimately a long defeat? If only we didn't know. This whole day, this celebration, this worship, would be so much easier if we just didn't know where it was headed...if we just didn't know about that cross on a hill.

It makes this day seem a bit premature, doesn't it? The celebration just a little early. It's like when you have a few warm days in spring and people begin thinking about planting their gardens. They go out, prepare the soil, put in those tender tomato plants, then we have a cold night and they run out the next day to scrape off the frost and see if anything survived. Sometimes it might be better to wait and see – not risk defeat.

I actually said this to the father of the prodigal son. Remember when that irresponsible kid came home and his father ran down the road to meet him. He grabbed him and kissed him and sobbed with joy over the boy's return. Threw a big party, called in the neighbors, there was singing and dancing until the wee hours of the morning. I took him aside and said, "How do you know the boy will stay? He just might get a good night's sleep, change his shirt, grab some food and be gone again tomorrow. Maybe you should take a little time. Put him on a short leash, sort of a thirty day probation. Then have your party. You don't want all this to end up being just another defeat." Sometimes isn't it better just to wait and see, not get too excited, too committed. Don't jump into something prematurely, don't risk another defeat. Is Palm Sunday just too premature?

I confess that more often than I like, the Bible tells me things I just don't want to know. For example, Luke, bless his little heart, has told us three times that this parade is going to a cross. This parade is not going to end in Ives Park with music and food and a big rally. This parade is not going to end with Jesus being lifted up on people's shoulders while they shout, "Hail to the King!" He is going to be lifted up on a cross. Not once, but three times, Luke tells us this. Thanks, Luke, for ruining the story for me.

If only we didn't know...but we do know. Maybe I should have stopped the choir's procession today. "Hold it, stop the music! Do you people have any idea where this is going? It's not a parade. It's a funeral procession! You ought to know. You should know. Otherwise we are just setting ourselves up for another long defeat.

A pastor writes, "I know someone who runs a clinic for indigent patients in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. She trained at one of the finest medical schools in the country, could have gone anywhere she wanted and had a lucrative career in medicine. But she said, 'I feel called to work among the poor, those not served by the present health care apparatus.' By the time she gets most of her patients, they are so badly diseased, so malnourished, that they are terminal and don't have long to live. She works ten-hour days, has been assaulted twice during her nearly twenty years as a doctor. And in spite of her hard work and long hours, there are still so many she must turn away. Why does she do it? Is she just resigned to defeat? Or could it be that she actually believes that the unemployed, unarmed, homeless rabbi who bounces into Jerusalem this day is none other than the truth about God, the key to what is really going on in the world?" Could it be that the one who rides by is one who is actually reaching out to all of us in a costly embrace, who is determined to bring close all those who are at a distance, who is daring to live and die for a vision of the world, of true life, that is radically different from anything we have heard or seen before? You know, walking with someone like that just might be worth it, no matter what lies ahead. As Mother Teresa said, "Every act of love is an act of peace, no matter how small."

A Fred Craddock story that gently makes a similar point: "I saw two little girls playing with a balloon, a red balloon that had been inflated with helium. It would float up to the ceiling, then they would grab the string and pull it down. They'd pull it down and then take turns turning it loose. They were having a wonderful time. What struck me, however, was that this was happening in the lobby of a hospital. In over 200 rooms there was pain and suffering and anxiety and grief. And in the lobby two little girls were playing with a balloon. Do you think I should have said to them, 'What's the matter with you? Don't you know this is a hospital?' Should I have said that?"

Should we say to that doctor in Birmingham, "What's the matter with you? Why do you bother? Don't you know that most of your patients are going to die no matter what you do?" Should I have said to the choir this morning, "What's the matter with you? How can you celebrate knowing where this parade is going?" Palms in church, balloons in the hospital...what's the matter with you people?

Maybe we dare to sing and dance and wave our palms, even on the way to the cross, because when we look up and see the One riding by on that beast of burden, we truly do see our only glory and our only hope. Maybe we dare to sing and dance and wave our palms because the love that rides by on the way to the cross is the very love of God, the love of God for creation, the love of God for us, a love which we will discover has no limits, not even the limit of death.

Just another chapter in the story of our long defeat? Perhaps. But hang in there, like Paul Farmer continue to fight the good fight, dare to celebrate anyway, don't turn your back, because, in the words of theologian, Rebecca Chopp, "On Palm Sunday, a window opens, quickly, for us to see something higher, better and more beautiful than the troubled ways of this world – a window through which we see God as the one who rides with us into a new city...Like all scriptures, the Palm Sunday story names something about our journey of faith: it says that amid struggle, anguish, denial and forgetfulness we have a wild and soaring anticipation, a vision of a new way, a glimpse of a new world...On this day, before our struggle with the coming week, let our longings give rise to new words of anticipation, our imaginations birth new images of human flourishing, our hands, arms and legs dance and our voices cry out for the triumph of human hope and godly grace." Even in the face of what often seems like defeat after defeat after defeat, how can we turn our backs on a hope like that? James Farmer can't. That doctor in Birmingham can't. Jesus can't. Hopefully, neither can we. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.