

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

# A Surprise Encounter

April 5, 2009  
Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:1-4  
John 12:12-18

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III  
April 3, 2009

*“The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.”*

Prayer: Holy God, on this day of your entrance into Jerusalem, we pray you will enter into our lives with your transforming power. Amen.

This past Friday was an unusual day. Normally I hunker down at my computer and pound out my sermon for Sunday. Not this past Friday. Cydney and I headed down to Collegeville, PA to Ursinus College for an orientation designed for students who were accepted by the school. There were about five hundred of us parents and students. Tours of the campus were led by current Ursinus students, and Cyd and I got in on one of the last tours of the morning. Because we were rushed, our tour guide quickly welcomed us and headed out immediately. I caught a good enough look at her to know that she looked familiar. I said to Cyd, “Our guide looks just like Kaitlin, (one of the girls who worked with me on the PCC-YMT from 2003-2007).” As we were walking behind her, I said to Cyd, “I’m going to

ask her what her name is.” Cyd said, “Dad, don’t make a fool of yourself.” So, I held back... I know! Can you believe it? Well, at the first place where we stopped on our tour, I couldn’t help myself. I asked her for her name, and she said, “I’m Kaitlin.” And as soon as she said that, she knew me instantly—she threw her arms around me and said, “I saw you with a quick glance, and I knew you looked familiar!” What a wonderful surprise encounter! We were at Ursinus College for one purpose, Cyd’s orientation, and lo and behold, I discovered Kaitlin was there! It was very good to see her and it made that part of my morning that much more exciting!

The same kind of situation was happening in Jerusalem. The Jews had arrived for one purpose—to celebrate the Passover, and lo and behold, they discovered Jesus was arriving there as well. You see, Jesus’ reputation has preceded him. The comments were audible: “He’s the one who changed water into wine at that wedding a year ago” (John 2:1-12) “He’s the one who healed the blind man with mud not that far back.” (see John 9). “I saw him feed five thousand people a while ago” (John 6:1-14). “Oh yeah, Jesus... He’s the one who on the last day of the big festival of the tabernacle just a few weeks ago yelled at the crowd, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink (John 7:37-38a). “Did you hear? Just the other day, he raised a guy from the dead. He was in the grave

for four days” (John 11:1-44).

And then, when they saw Jesus arriving on a young donkey, this was the topper! He was arriving just as Zechariah’s ancient prophecy foretold: *“Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.”* All the people had to do was add it all up: changing water into wine, making the blind see, preaching with authority, feeding the multitudes, raising Lazarus from the dead, and now, riding into Jerusalem on a young donkey? He *must* be the long-awaited one, the Messiah. What a wonderful surprise! He’s here! So, lay down your branches! Wave your palms! Spread forth your coats and your cloaks on the ground before him! Our king is here! Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Save us, Jesus, from our tyranny!”

It was true—the common Israelite did face tyranny. Every day. Every hour. The Roman government controlled things with the threat of force. Every day and every moment, the oppressive Judaic authorities were always exacting the laws. So, when Jesus enters into Jerusalem, it was such a surprising contrast to the powers that existed. Jesus entered Jerusalem as a role model of peace, contrary to the Roman soldiers who entered the city ready to stop any uprisings or protests with violence at this Passover festival.

Jesus entered Jerusalem as an example of humility as opposed to the arrogance of the Pharisees. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem sparked a resurgence of hope that is shown by the cries of "Hosanna! Save us!" for Jesus just might be the one who enters right into the heart of their lives and saves them from these oppressions—contrary to the despair that entered in their lives by the tyranny and oppression they lived with day in and day out. Jesus came into their lives and into their tyranny and despair and... brought hope.

It's a story for us, too. The Christ's Holy Spirit can enter into our lives and bring us hope in the midst of our greatest hope-sapping circumstances.

The tyranny in our lives, the oppression on our inner spirit caused by this recession and economic downturn is depressing and hope-sapping, isn't it? People all over are taking pay cuts. Retirement funds are being slashed. Health insurance benefits are stopping and many employees now have to find their own insurance. Retirement funds, pensions, 401k's, IRA's all are taking huge hits. On top of all that, unemployment is on the rise—at the time when I wrote this, unemployment has reached 8.5 %, the highest ever since 1983.

Even some desperate people are robbing convenience stores just to eat.

Did you catch this story? At four in the morning last week, a man holding the hand of his young daughter, walked into a convenient store, pulled out a gun, and held up the cashier demanding money and food. The surveillance tape recorded his voice as saying that he had been out of work for several months and he needed to feed his daughter. Now, I know it's not right; there are other options available to him, and no doubt, there are probably a whole lot more details to the man's story that I don't know about, but the point is that the recessing economy is having a devastating effect on some people.

Now hear me on this point, everyone... in the midst of this recession, I encourage us to know that God's Holy Spirit that was in Christ can enter into our lives right where we are, right into our economic struggles. We can expect God to give us the hope we need to find the wherewithal to make smart decisions that will enable us to make it through these difficult days. I encourage us not to be anxious about tomorrow, but rather, have hope that God's sustaining power will be present with us, no matter what the recession brings, no matter what sacrifices we might have to make. Trust in God... and expect God to enter and meet us where we are—perhaps in a surprise encounter—inspiring the hope that will enable us to get through these days.

I read a story about the man with one the greatest voices in soul music

who gave up his fame (and his women, and his cocaine) to serve the Lord about 31 years ago. In spite of the magnitude of his success, Al Green chose to walk away from secular music, and in fact, from secular life, before the 70's had ended. As he walked away, he needed to trust in God. He needed to rely on the hope provided by the Holy Spirit. In those tumultuous days, Green explained how God entered into his life in a surprise encounter: "God said to me, 'I want you to be priceless. The love of God cannot be bought.' God told me I could have more clothes than I could ever possibly wear, and more food than I could ever eat, and more cars than I could ever drive, and all that money. And then he said to me, 'I kept my side of the bargain—what about you?'" Now, the Rev. Al Green is keeping his side of the bargain with a gesture toward God every bit as large as his talent. He spends most of his time preaching in a Memphis church and writing, singing, and recording gospel music (Scott Spencer, "Al Green's gotta serve somebody," *Rolling Stone*, September 28, 2000, 32-34, [http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?item\\_to\\_pic\\_id=1993](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_to_pic_id=1993), retrieved April 3, 2009).

Al Green's story is just one story of hundreds of thousands of stories of people who held onto their hope in God during the lean economic times and have found that God is faithful and good. Hundreds of thousands of people

have found that God has entered into their specific situations with a presence that calms fears and a wisdom that surpasses human wisdom. They placed their trust in God and in God's timing.

Let us do the same. "Let not your hearts be troubled," says Jesus. "Believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). Trust God to come into our lives. Give thanks to God for all things, for God is good. Have hope that God's steadfast love endures forever! Make the effort to welcome God in...

... and guess what? A wonderful surprise encounter can occur as we go out to God on our journeys and as God comes in: God arrives here! At Chapel Hill. In this place. God arrives in every one of us. In our homes. In our economy. God is in our lives! What a wonderful surprise! Lay down your branches! Wave your palms! Spread forth your coats and your cloaks before the Christ! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! May the Christ of God ride on, ride on in majesty, for he represents God riding on with majesty right into our very lives! Amen!