

FIND ME! SAVE ME! HOLD ME!

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And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9)

On Palm Sunday we celebrate the coming of Jesus into Jerusalem to save his people. This year, as I've wondered about the meaning and the message of today, I recalled a tragic story I once heard about a man named Siegfried Noffke. In the summer of 1961, Noffke was 22-years old. He was a loving husband, the father of a baby daughter, and a resident of East Berlin. One evening, while Noffke happened to be visiting relatives in West Berlin, Communist border guards in the East hastily erected the beginnings of the Berlin Wall. When Noffke tried to return to his wife and child the next day, the East German police barred his way. Already the concrete and barbed wire barrier that would divide the city for 28 years was impassable.

Noffke quickly tired of having no contact with his wife and baby but to wave at them across the increasingly secure no-man's land. Thus he joined a clandestine group working to tunnel its way under the wall in hopes of rescuing their now captive family members. The route they chose was 200-yards underground from the basement of one house in the West to another in the East. Plotting the course would allow no room for error. Digging the tunnel would be hazardous and grueling, but it would all be worth it for the men because reunion with their families was at stake. Finally, at the basement floor of the house in East Berlin, Noffke himself was the first to break through. He emerged to find a detail of East German police waiting for him, and with their machine guns they shot him on sight. As it turned out, a fellow tunnel digger, whose sister was one of the wives to be rescued, had been betraying the group all along. Imagine, the betrayer handed over to the Communists not only Siegfried Noffke, but also his own brother-in-law.

Siegfried Noffke's betrayal and death at the Berlin Wall would be one of many more to come as people tried to penetrate the terrible barrier that symbolized the Cold War. When the wall finally came down in November of 1989, it took everyone by surprise. At the dawn of 1989, when the Soviet block of nations was firmly in place, no one could have imagined that the wall had less than a year to stand. Even as late as March of 1989 people were still dying in daring attempts to go over it, under it, or through it. If only they'd known how soon the winds of change would blow, but no one did. I remember well my own reaction when the restive crowds in East and West Berlin surged over the wall and began tearing it down. It was as if the world as I'd always known it was changing. That which had stood and in many ways defined a generation suddenly was gone. The whole Soviet Union was soon to follow. The year 1989 changed everything.

Likewise, this year 2011 seems destined already to be a time of sweeping change on the world stage. Historians may point to a single act by a single man as the spark that ignited revolution across the Arab world. On December 17, 2010 a street vendor in Tunis could suffer no more harassment from the authorities of his country's autocratic government, who earlier that day had seized the cart from which he sold his wares. Unable to get any justice, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself afire in protest. Crowds took to the streets in support and grew in number. By January 14, the 23-year totalitarian regime of the Tunisian president was finished.

President Hosni Mubarek of Egypt was the next to go. Massive crowds, sometimes two-million strong, emboldened by the success of the revolution in Tunisia, and able to coordinate their efforts through Facebook and Twitter, thronged Tahrir Square in Cairo and would not go home until Mubarek resigned. He finally did on February 11, ending thirty years of stifling control over the country. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya may be the dictator to fall. The world has suffered long through the sin and strife and international mischief making of this one. Now the people of Libya, with NATO's help from above, are trying to end Gaddafi's forty-two years of wrong. Libyans have had enough. They are ready for a change, as are possibly the Yemenis, the Bahrainis, the Syrians, the Moroccans, and the Algerians. Who knows how many other tyrants will go in this year of 2011? And who knows who will take their place? The sad truth is, not every popular uprising is of God, and not every revolution brings the kingdom of heaven closer to earth.

When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem in or about the year 29 AD, the people were ready for everything to change. They'd had enough of the Roman occupiers' watchful eyes, heavy taxes, and oppressive policies. They'd had enough of politicians like Pontius Pilate, who in the interest of keeping Roman order was more than willing to release the baton wielding camel jockeys into any suspicious assembly of persons. They'd had enough of corrupt Temple officials like Caiphas, who loved the tradition more than the people, and only used the people to serve the tradition, rather than vice-versa. The weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faith – were at the bottom of the agenda for the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. The people had had enough, they were ready for a change, and the year 29 AD was promising to be just such a time.

The Gospel of Matthew suggests that the first Palm Sunday – the spirit of which we've tried to capture today – occurred a few days before the Jews were to eat the Passover meal. Some historians and Biblical scholars calculate that the population of Jerusalem would swell to nearly two-million people during Passover. It was the perfect time for a revolution, but it would take the right person to ignite the movement. The Palm Sunday crowds thought Jesus just might be such a person: the central figure of a rebellion that would overwhelm and oust the Romans. The word *hosanna* that they shouted to welcome Jesus means "save now." It was a prayer to God as well as a rallying cry for rebellion. To be sure, Jesus intended to penetrate the strongholds of the occupier. But as for the way through the wall, and what the wall really was, and who had built it up, and who was on the other side of it, Jesus had different ideas entirely. The people wanted salvation from Caesar and Pilate and Rome. Jesus came to bring salvation from Satan and sin and death. Palm Sunday is an ironic day. The crowds shouted all the right things for all the wrong reasons. Their job description for the Messiah missed the agenda of Jesus by a mile. The complete mismatch of expectations will become evident as the rest of the story unfolds.

At this point in the liturgy we stand between the Palm Sunday celebration and the Passion narrative to follow. When the Passion narrative is finished, you may be tempted to conclude that Jesus was a tragic figure like Siegfried Noffke: nobly trying to save his loved ones, but unaware that a betrayer was close at hand, and murdered because of the treachery. Or he was like the Tunisian street vendor, who sacrificed his own life with a gesture that he hoped would galvanize a movement. If you pay attention to the story Matthew tells us today, I believe you'll come to see that Jesus, while bearing some similarity to these two, was actually up to much more – something hard to understand. Far from being a helpless victim, Jesus was working methodically to fulfill God's word spoken through the prophets, and dig to the deepest parts of Jerusalem.

The donkey is the first clue that Jesus knew exactly how to get where he wanted to go. An ancient oracle from the prophet Zechariah declared that God's chosen Messiah would arrive

in the city riding a donkey. Matthew tells us the deliberate steps Jesus took to secure the donkey. A secret follower in the city had one, and Jesus made arrangements well in advance for his disciples to acquire it with a series of passwords. Arranging for the room to eat the Passover meal is another clue that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. Imagine: a city with ten-times its normal population, and you need dinner reservations for thirteen on the most popular night of the year. Jesus did it through another inside friend and the use of more passwords. The betrayal of Judas is yet another clue. Jesus knew all along that Judas was going to betray him. How did he know? Not by magical, mystical powers. He knew because he had a network of people who informed him. So with the help of his friends on the ground, and with God's help from above, Jesus was able to stay one step ahead of Judas all the time. Jesus would ride the betrayal to the inside, to the center of power, face-to-face with Pilate, and Herod, and Peter.

Indeed, the betrayal and treachery and all the passions and yearnings of Holy Week, Jesus rides them still down through the ages to come face-to-face with you, and me. I take Jesus' carefully planned, carefully timed penetration to heart of big, loud, self-important Jerusalem as a parable of his entrance into this church, into this community, into your heart and mine. Jerusalem is us. Jerusalem is the inner depths of the human soul. And Jesus the Messiah is advancing on the well-guarded fortresses around our hearts, despite all we do to run and hide and fall away from love. His goal is ever to find us, to save us, to hold us. *Lord, you have searched me out and known me; You press upon me, behind and before; If I climb up to heaven you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also (from Ps 139).*

Palm Sunday reminds me of a play called "Hold Me!" by the cartoonist and playwright Jules Feiffer. The title of the play is ironic, as is Palm Sunday. Throughout two acts Feiffer brings to the stage various combinations of random characters he made famous in his cartoons. All the players want to find love and connect deeply with each other, but seem to say and do everything to assure that they miss each other by a mile, even while in the same room. Every scene is a complete mismatch of expectations, and usually comic misunderstanding of how they might wind up in the end mutually holding each other. They never do.

In the final scene, a man named Bernard has presumably had enough and is hiding from everyone: his girlfriend, his mother, his boss. As they all call his name from offstage, Bernard retreats to his room, sinks deep into his bed, he says to himself, "I live inside a shell. That is inside a wall. That is inside a fort. That is inside a tunnel. That is under the sea. Where I am safe from you." And then he adds ironically, "If you really loved me, you'd find me."

On Palm Sunday we celebrate the coming of Jesus to save his people. I pray that in this year 2011, the Spirit of the living Christ really gets through your defenses and under your skin and finds you. We live in a shell, that is inside a wall, that is inside a fort, that is inside a tunnel, that is under the sea. But we are not safe from you, O Lord.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

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