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Parades: giant balloons, floats made of colorful flowers, firetrucks blaring loud sirens, men riding in tiny cars, clowns in colorful costumes, and lots of candy thrown to excited children. What's there not to like about parades?

When Staci and I lived in a small southern community where there wasn't much to do, parades were a big item. The parade of fair queen candidates lasted for hours as parents drove cars filled with all ages of girls, from the three-year-old first time candidates to the teenage hopeful contestants. From the Christmas parade to the fair parade to the Memorial Day parade and any other excuse for a parade, people lined the streets, often reserving a spot the day before by placing chairs along the route. I recall taking our exchange student from Lithuania to two parades, and she eagerly watched every float pass by, sights she had never seen in her country.

Parades seem to capture our attention, taking us away from our daily routines, providing an

escape into a fantasy world of colorful sights and sounds, so when Jesus came riding through town, people gathered along the streets. Rather than our firetrucks and antique cars, a donkey walked through town, carrying a man who had been telling stories about God. The crowd spread their coats on the ground, a symbolic way of welcoming someone they wished to honor. No sirens blaring. No candy thrown in the streets. Just a donkey and Jesus and a group of disciples walking alongside their teacher.

When we think of this parade, we most often think of the leafy palm branches cut from trees and spread upon the ground, but interestingly did you notice that Luke's Gospel doesn't even mention palm branches? Matter of fact, Luke doesn't say anything about any leafy branches of any kind! Although the other three Gospel writers refer to leafy branches or palm branches, Luke didn't feel the branches important enough to mention in his telling of the events. If he lived today, he might wonder why we even call this day Palm Sunday.

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I sometimes wonder why Luke didn't mention the palms. He spent more time describing the tied up donkey, along with the instructions to untie it, for he noted five times that the donkey had to be untied using forms of the Greek word *lyo*, which means "to bind together." Because Luke made such a point of emphasizing the unbinding, saying it over and over again, it's almost as though he's trying to tell us something, as though he has hidden a deeper message inside his story.

What's so important about the untying of the donkey, the unbinding of the ropes? The two preceding stories give us a hint.

Right before Jesus and his disciples untied the donkey, he told a parable about a king who was planning to take an extended trip, but before doing so he left ten people in charge of his money. When he returned from his trip the king discovered that several had used the money wisely, even making a profit with his money. One person, however, was so afraid of losing the money that he buried it in the

ground. It seems as though this man was all tied up with fear, bound by the risk that he faced.

Right before this parable Jesus encountered Zacchaeus, the story we heard last Sunday. Zacchaeus was all tied up in his job as a tax collector, taking more money than necessary and pocketing the rest for himself. Although small in stature, he was probably tied up with guilt, but when Jesus offered to visit his home, Zacchaeus became unbound, proclaiming that he would pay back four times the amount anyone he had cheated.

Luke offers two stories about people bound up by their resources: one by taking too much wealth, and the other tied up by the fear of risk.

I wonder how these stories echo in our own lives? Have we ever been bound up by our stuff, unable to let go and enjoy the parade of life? Have we ever been all tied up and afraid to take a risk?

Just imagine what would have happened if the donkey owner had been bound up and not let his donkey be untied. He could have said:

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“I’m sorry. I might need to ride that today, so please don’t untie it.” OR

“I paid a lot for that donkey. Please don’t get a scratch on it, for I’m still paying for it.” OR

“If you ride that donkey, please don’t spill any food on it. I hate riding a sticky donkey.”

If that donkey remained bound up, Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem might have been less spectacular. Maybe the Roman officials would have overlooked him. Maybe Jesus would not have been seen as a threat. Maybe he would have never been captured and crucified. No donkey. No parade. No cross. No resurrection. No Easter.

Fortunately the owner of that donkey allowed his property to become unbound, freely offering the ordinary donkey to create an extraordinary parade. I wonder what someone watching Jesus enter town might tell us today about that parade.

*So I understand you’ve been hearing stories about Jesus’ parables, though I understand last week you encountered Zacchaeus, a living parable. You might say that my situation is similar, for I’m*

*not here to tell you a parable that Jesus told, but one that he lived. Jesus entered town in a way that told a story, a message none of us expected to see or hear.*

*We were used to parades coming through our city of Jerusalem—usually soldiers on war horses to celebrate a victory. I never paid much attention to them, for I didn’t like all the violence the Romans used to keep us under control. They seemed to think they could use their power to suppress our faith in God, but we knew better!*

*I’ll always remember when Jesus came with a parade of followers, though he didn’t ride a war horse—he came riding a humble donkey. I understood his message—that his leadership differed from those on war horses. Rather than with violence, Jesus would lead with peace.*

*People in the crowds began cutting branches off the palm trees, scattering them along the ground before Jesus. We often did that to celebrate the arrival of an important person. We shouted “Hosanna, save us, God” as the parade walked through the streets.*

*We began throwing coats on the ground, which reminded me of a story from our scriptures about the time when Jehu was secretly anointed king of Israel. When fellow commanders learned Jehu was selected as their next king, they took off their coats and threw them at Jehu’s feet as a sign of their respect and loyalty to him.<sup>1</sup>*

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*I hoped that no one in power would catch the meaning of this action, for it could get everyone in a lot of trouble if leaders thought we were celebrating a secret king. Sadly, that's what happened, for several days later I heard that Jesus had been arrested and taken to trial.*

*Since our Passover celebration was drawing near, Pontius Pilate offered the release of one prisoner, and I had hoped it would be Jesus. But the crowd who celebrated at the beginning of the week seemed to turn on Jesus by the end of the week. Maybe they were disappointed that the one they hoped would save them was now facing trial.*

*When we heard the trial was over, we learned that Jesus was condemned to death! They paraded him around the courtyard wearing a crown made of thorns, mocking him as the new king. I crowded with the others along the street as Jesus slowly walked through town carrying his own cross on which he would die. Sadly what began as a parade of celebration at the beginning of the week turned to parading Jesus in mockery at the end of the*

*week. What began with hope ended with sorrow. But as Jesus walked by, I somehow got the feeling that this parade was not the end of the story. (Extinguish candle.)*

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As we celebrate this Palm Sunday, may we discern what we can untie in our church or community or homes. What tied up things in our lives might we let go of that can make the world a better place? Loosen the bonds. Let go. Trust that God will help us unravel the knots of our lives, setting our donkeys free to prepare the way for something amazing to happen as we join the parade and celebrate the arrival of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 9:6-13