

There is a snake in the palms – John 12

Can you remember a time? Can you remember a place? Can you remember an event that so unmistakably demonstrated the active presence of God? Think back for a moment. When the glory and presence and transforming power of God was so at work that you thought your heart might break. We ache for those times places and events. Perhaps it was a time at summer camp when you were 13 years old. Somehow everything came together and your life was changed by the work of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it was during your college years and through a small group ministry with Campus Crusade or Intervarsity God forever redirected your life. For others it might have been a short term missions trip that was filled with stress and fatigue and the unexpected but in the midst of all of that God did a work in and through your life that you remember today like it was yesterday. I believe that the disciples viewed the triumphant march into Jerusalem in just the same way.

VIDEO CLIP

Although all of the Gospel writers recorded this event, they each frame it a bit differently. I want us to turn to John gospel the 12th chapter to look at the Palm Sunday story. Lets begin with the first verse. *Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.* This is the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. A place of safety and refuge in many ways. It is at this time that Mary breaks open the jar of alabaster and anoints the head and feet of Jesus. Word spreads throughout the village that Jesus is resident and the crowd's stream to see the one who raised the homeowner from the dead.

Skip down to verse 12. Word soon was passed to the gathered pilgrim in Jerusalem that Jesus was on the outskirts of Jerusalem. In an already festive mood the joy and emotion of the crowd begins to build. With a variety of motives a large number of people head out from the city to Bethany to meet Jesus on the road and return with him to the city. By the way, this is the exact imagery that Paul uses in Thessalonians when he says that those alive will meet Christ in the air and return to earth not

be raptured to heaven. Now what these people expected who went out to meet Jesus we are not sure. In fact, they probably were not sure either but hey, everybody loves a parade. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't? We are exactly the same way. Last year at this time you couldn't give away Twins tickets. The talks of contraction, labor problems and the continuing debate on a stadium left most people feeling pretty uninterested in the Twins. As the season unfolded and they began to win then things changed. Attendance and excitement grew. People wanted to part of something exciting. "How about them Twins" was no longer a weekly joke by Garrison Keilor during his description of his quiet week in Lake Wobegone, my hometown. And so the crowd grew. And then they came together. Jesus, the disciples, those who had been traveling with him, those who had joined in Bethany and now those coming out from Jerusalem. And in the midst of the excitement we have the familiar Palm Sunday declaration *"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!"* *Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."* Great joy. Great celebration. God is showing up and answering the long cries from His people. And we understand that. And dear ones, we plead for the same thing. We plead for God to come and reveal Himself at work in our presence. Is that your prayer today? Is that your desire? To be a part of a great work of God?

But there was a snake in the waving palm branches. It first raises its head in verse 45 of the previous chapter.

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both

our place and our nation." You see. Wherever God is at work the evil one is present seeking to disrupt, confuse or destroy. Verse 54 ***Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.*** Jesus had to curtail his ministry because of the opposition of the Pharisees. They were the snakes in the palm branches. In 1990 I was leading my first short-term mission trip on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. We arrived tired after a long day in a hot, crowded bus. The first night I was unable to sleep because of the heat and so around 2am got up to go sit out on the front stoop. When I closed the door and turned around I could see about 20 feet away the nearest hut to our building. In front was a smoky fire and standing next to it was a woman. As I looked she picked up a chicken, wrung its neck, removed its head, smeared the blood on her body and then flicked it towards our building all the time chanting. I don't think I have ever been so frightened and I quickly went back inside. We had come with unbelievable expectation of what God was going to do but let me tell you. There were snakes in the palms. Most of the team got sick, several seriously. I was struck by lightning one afternoon. Huge dissension in the village over our presence and a breakdown between our sponsoring agency Food For the Hungry and their village representative. Last summer in Ukraine the school was broken into and a lot of our supplies, sound equipment and snacks were stolen. There were snakes in the Palms. In verses 10-11 we read. ***Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.*** There were snakes in the palms. This past winter we had a wonderful experience of the forty-day adventure but at the very end the snakes showed up and the staff and stewards have been prayerfully and diligently cutting their heads off. You see, whenever and wherever God is at work Satan is at work also. And he will do anything to first of all destroy but if

he cannot do that then he will confuse or redirect or disrupt. Are some of you there right now? You volunteered to be part of a ministry because you saw God at work. You knew that God was showing up and lives were being changed. And you jumped in and are using your gifts but you have discovered that there are snakes in the palms. Might I suggest that after the service you visit with the prayer team and invite them to pray briefly with you.

One last point. Take a look at verse 16. *At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.* Time brings perspective. Looking back is a whole lot easier than stepping back. For the disciples, it was not until after the resurrection when the glorified Christ stood before them that it finally came together. And I do believe that for many situations time passed by gives us the ability to look back not only with perspective but also with understanding. We see how God has been at work in and through to bring about our good and His glory. But that is a helpful lesson because it enables us in the midst of snake fighting to remember how it all ends.