

When I was in first grade, something happened that I didn't appreciate until many years afterward. I lived in a small town in northeastern Illinois, called Mundelein. It was the home of a beautiful Catholic seminary college, and most of the people in town were Catholic – my family was Lutheran. I lived on a street with other young families, so there were lots of kids, but most of them went to the church school – my brother, sister and I went to Lincoln Public School a couple miles away.

Now, when you're in first grade, you don't pay too much attention to anything more than the absolute necessities of life: what's for supper; if it's raining or not, so you can go outside for recess; whether or not your best friend of the week is absent and what you're wearing for Halloween. So, on a particular day in October of 1960, our teacher rounded us up from the playground and marched us to the other side of the school that faced the street. I remember thinking it was odd – it was the middle of a bright, beautiful autumn day and normally, we would be in class doing some work of some kind wishing we could be outside in the sun – but as our little line of students got closer to the street, I noticed that there were lots of other kids and teachers outside, too, lining up along the side of the road. It was noisy – people were laughing and shouting – waving tiny American flags and pointing down the street – and it was crowded.

Keep in mind that first graders don't move too quickly – there's much meandering and dawdling to be done, you know – and so by the time we actually got to the side of the road, I almost missed what all the fuss was about. I managed to squeeze between some older kids and get to the curb, then I stopped like a good girl, and looked to the left. There were policemen on motor cycles – I don't remember how many – but it seems there were a lot of them – and their lights were flashing, but I didn't hear any sirens. I did hear music – it was probably some Sousa march – coming from a loud speaker somewhere. And then, there was a large, bright red convertible – with a white interior – wide open and moving very slowly – followed by more policemen. That was it – no band, no floats, just the car.

And seated on the back – not in the seat, but on top of the seat in the back – was a man I didn't recognize with my little first-grader's knowledge. He waved and smiled as he slowly went by, and the crowd went crazy with shouting and clapping and waving their little flags. I asked, to no one in particular, who the man was. I was especially impressed with the fact that no one made him sit down in the backseat and he managed to get away with something I really would love to do, but I had no clue as to why we were outside on a beautiful fall day, watching this very small parade. I'm eternally thankful to the voice above me who straightened me out and gave me something to hook this memory on! The

voice said, "Why, that's JFK – John Fitzgerald Kennedy – and he's running for President of the United States!"

Like I said, at the time, I had no idea who this was or why I should care, but I did get the sense that no matter who he was, he was special somehow. The crowd buzzed with an energy I now recognize as an excitement at seeing someone famous; I could feel something really positive all around me – no one seemed angry or mad – everyone was smiling and probably exclaiming things like, "Wow – he's cute!" or "Can you believe he came through our tiny town?" I couldn't say for sure what was said because I wasn't tuned into that part of the whole event, but I can tell you I sensed something that these days probably felt more like hope and expectation for tomorrow. Change was in the air. A Catholic town greeted a relatively young Catholic candidate for president with open arms, and while I later found out that my parents voted straight ticket Republican for AUH<sub>2</sub>O, I'm pretty sure a good number of the folks around me were Democrats and thrilled to see their guy in the flesh, on the back seat of a red convertible, driving through Mundelein, Illinois. Two years later, Kennedy was killed – but he lives in the minds of many people, even now, and you get some pretty amazing answers when someone asks you, "Where were you the day Kennedy was killed?"

It's hard to ignore the parallels of this memory with what we celebrate today. To be honest, I was really digging for a way to share thoughts with you about Palm Sunday that hadn't been overstated so many times before, and when I realized that so much of what I felt as a young girl seeing JFK for the first time could be compared to what the crowd must have felt when Jesus made his way through Jerusalem, I knew I'd found my connection.

Because on a very bright day in another century, in his hometown, Jesus played the crowd and rekindled a sense of hope in the people. Did you know that the word "Hosanna" means "save, we pray?" He'd been out in the desert and in towns all around doing God's work in a ministry of service, but now it was time to come home and face his destiny. The Jews thought he was the Messiah, all right, but not one of a spiritual nature — the word "messiah" means, "God with us" and they really thought he might be the kind of messiah who would go to battle for them and bring them salvation of a different kind. That he rode into town on a humble creature like a donkey or small colt and not a proud, prancing horse (which would signal his intent to go to war) says that even in this moment Jesus was sending a new message – "I come to you in the name of Peace from God. You will have your freedom, but it may not be the kind you think it will be."

There must have been little children like me in the crowd who really didn't understand the magnitude of what they were seeing and experiencing. A young man, who probably looked like all the other men, rode into town surrounded by his friends. He must have been a special person to the adults in the crowd, though, because they danced and sang and waved branches from the trees in his honor – but he wasn't carrying weapons or wearing any armor and there

weren't soldiers around him, so he probably presented a very approachable and unusual image to the world. The charisma I mentioned last week would have been streaming from his presence, and there must have been a buzz of some kind that the children could overhear – murmurs of “Is that him? He doesn't look much like a Messiah, but Yaweh must know – just think of all the amazing things we've heard about that the man's done in the past few years! Just think about what he could do for us!”

It couldn't have been a typical gathering of Jews in Jerusalem, and this fact alone may have drawn attention from others than those cheering for Jesus. Standing in the shadows were darker figures who played a key role in this day's celebration; religious leaders found him a serious threat to the stability of their beliefs and practices, and this triumphant return eventually ended in a horrible, painful death. Soon the people cheering and dancing in the street would face an uncertain future, and wail in agonizing grief for the loss of their Messiah.

I doubt that any person who accepts a high-profile leadership role does so without considering all angles of what it entails...the noble heart that takes on responsibility to act on behalf of others must consider potential consequences and possible scenarios. Dreams of better days have to be tempered with realities – and the broad smiles and waves from a car or a donkey must hide other thoughts – even the idea that this day of celebration is short-lived and the hard work ahead will diminish the glow of what the celebration feels like at this moment. They don't exactly know what the future will bring, but they know it may bring pain and even a sudden ending, because not everyone has the same vision and dreams the same dream.

For Jesus, who knew what was to come in just a few days, the joyous march into Jerusalem must have been particularly poignant. Just when the people finally get a sense of his true mission for God and he is welcomed home like a hero, he knows he must leave them whimpering and wondering what to do next without him. A secret too horrible to even speak of to his most trusted friends gnawed at his heart, and all he could do about it was take each day and follow through to his destiny. The Road to Jerusalem would be the road to his death...

And when it was all over, I suppose people said to one another, “Where were you the day he was crucified? Do you remember that magical day when we danced and sang in the street and shouted,

“You are Messiah, Hosanna!

You are ‘God with Us’ – save, we pray!”

We're still shouting...

Amen.

