

Story: A Palm Sunday Parade (2009)

I want you to close your eyes and imagine yourself 2000 years ago, in a time before television, before cars, before video games, before airplanes - even before clothes with zippers and velcro! You're living in a country on the other side of the world - a hot dry, country. Instead of ice and snow you see sand, and stone, and patches of green grass here and there. Instead of houses built of wood and cement with slanted roofs, you see houses built of mud bricks and stone, with flat roofs where people do their laundry, plant their flowers in little pots, and even sometimes sleep. Instead of a sprawling suburb, you see a busy middle eastern city, full of people going to and fro. Now imagine that you grew up in just such a place, and just such a time. Your grandmother, Anna, has gathered all of you grandchildren around her in the shade of an olive tree, and she's going to tell you a story about when she was younger. Now you can keep your eyes closed, if that will help you imagine, or you can open them.

It was Passover time in Jerusalem: an exciting time, people everywhere, laughing and hugging relatives they hadn't seen since last Passover, women busy round their hearth fires, preparing the special meal. The men were spending most of their time at the temple, visiting, praying, discussing the Scriptures. We lived in a little village called Bethphage on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Most of the travelers went by our house to get to the centre of the city, so we had our share of excitement. I ran back and forth between helping mother with the food and looking out our doorway to see the bustling crowds. Father, who was working in the courtyard, laughed and teased me, saying I was like a little mouse running back and forth! Even my nose twitched with curiosity!

Passover is always exciting, but this one promised to be even more special. We had heard that a friend of ours, Jesus of Nazareth, was coming to the city this year, and would be arriving any time. He had arranged to borrow a donkey from us. I didn't really understand that part. Usually Jesus just walked in like everyone else; what did he need a donkey for? I asked Father to explain it to me, but he just shook his head. Later, though, I heard him tell mother, "The Master wants a donkey: I guess he's trying to make a point. A Messiah

should ride, not walk, into his own city." Mother laughed, and said, "A donkey! Surely one of his rich friends could have lent him a nice white horse or something. He'll look foolish." Father said, "Well, Jesus may be a Son of David, but he's never been quite what people expect. Let's wait and see what happens." So Father and I groomed our little colt, Beni, so that he would be ready when Jesus came.

Sure enough, the week before the Passover Feast, two of Jesus' disciples came by to pick up the donkey. I had seen them before, but had never spoken to them. We girls aren't really supposed to talk to men outside our family. Father saw them coming, and grinning, went right up behind them as they were untying the animal and said in a grumpy voice, "What are you doing with my animal?!" One of the disciples jumped, and then, recognizing Father, laughed and said, "The Lord has need of it." "Well," Father said, "then you might as well take it." So off they went. When they turned the corner, Father bent down to me and said, "Come ,Anna, I think this will be something to see!" I didn't know what he was talking about, but Father seemed excited, so I started to get excited too.

As we left the courtyard and started walking towards the centre of our little village, I could hear a lot of noise. It sounded like people were singing! As we got nearer, we saw that many of the Passover pilgrims were gathered around a small group near the well. It was Jesus and his disciples! They had dressed Beni up with cloaks on his back, and Jesus was sitting on him. As we watched, the crowds made way for him, and a little procession began. First some of the disciples came, dancing and dropping their coats on the ground in front of Beni as if Jesus were royalty! Then came Jesus, smiling and laughing at his friends' behaviour. Soon the people around us were smiling too. It was a parade!

People started shouting out , "Hosanna!" You could hear people asking their friends what was going on, and their friends explaining, or just shrugging and laughing. More and more people joined in. They stripped leaves from the palm trees and waved them in the air, shouting and singing! It was wonderful! Passover is always fun, but this - this was exciting!

Our friend Jesus was being treated like a king! I was jumping up and down and waving too - even Father was singing along!

The procession began to wind up the hill toward the temple. As we got nearer and nearer, we started to see temple guards - then Roman soldiers. Father began to look worried. Most of the people around us were still laughing and shouting, but a few others, like Father, looked concerned. Father was craning his head round in the crowd, as if he was looking for someone. Then he saw our neighbour Dorcas - she's Mother's age - coming out of a shop nearby. "Dorcas!" he called out over the crowd. "Dorcas!" She turned and smiled, and hurried up to us.

"What are you doing here, Aaron? And with Anna too!" My Father explained that we had been following Jesus, then asked Dorcas if she would mind taking me home. "But Papa!" I protested. "I want to go to the temple with you!" Already, the parade was almost beyond us, and I didn't want to lose Jesus.

Father knelt down beside me, and said, "Anna, do as I say. The temple might not be a good place for you today. The soldiers aren't going to be happy about this parade, and there might be a little bit of trouble. I want you to go home now, and tell your mother I'll be home as soon as I can be." He hugged me, ruffled my hair, and headed off in the direction of the temple.

"What did Papa mean, Dorcas? Did Jesus do something wrong?"

"No, dear, of course not. But the Romans won't like the fact that people are calling Jesus the Son of David. It sounds like they might want to make him king."

"Is Jesus the King?" I asked. Nothing seemed too good for my friend Jesus.

"I don't know dear; he's pretty special, but somehow I don't think that's what he's here for. Most of those people in the crowd know nothing about him. They're the ones who might cause trouble."

When Father came home that night, he looked worried. When Mother asked him, he told her that Jesus had driven all the merchants from the temple - actually pushed over the cages and carts and tumbled the tables and chairs around. Mother asked in alarm, "Was he arrested?" Father said, "No, thank God. There were too many people there - even children. I couldn't believe people brought their children there, but maybe it was the smart thing to do. The guards wouldn't risk hurting the children. It was the children who were singing, too, so what could the guards do to them?!" I wished I had been there, even though it sounded rather scary.

When I went to bed that night, I was singing to myself: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Well, children, that was a pretty exciting day. It felt as if for once people recognized how special Jesus was, and we were all caught up in the celebration. But it didn't last...

That incident in the temple was just the beginning of the trouble that was coming. My father spent a lot of time at the temple that week, like the other men, and he came home with stories of how the priests and elders seemed determined to trap Jesus into saying something awful so they could arrest him. I was so worried, I could barely sleep at night. My gentle Jesus - the one who played with us children, hugged and cuddled and told us stories; why would they want to lock him up? But Jesus was not always so gentle.

Father told us he yelled at the Pharisees and Scribes, telling them they were sinful, and working against God. I was shocked! They were supposed to be the good people, the people we looked up to. What was Jesus saying? One time he broke down and cried, because he said the people of Jerusalem had always killed prophets like him; then he said the temple would be destroyed. There were rumblings in the crowd about that, Father said.

Father was more and more worried. The mood of the people was changing. They didn't like what Jesus was saying now; Father said they didn't understand what Jesus was about. Well, I guess I didn't either, but I trusted him. Others did not. I didn't understand how people who were part of that parade could be so angry at him. I know what he said was shocking - but it was Jesus!

Then came the night of the Passover. Usually we celebrated at home, but Father came home the day before with a message that Jesus' friends were invited to share the Passover meal with him at a friend's house. He had especially asked that I might come. They needed a child there for the

Passover ritual. I got to ask the question about why we have this meal - the youngest child there always gets to do that. Jesus told the usual story about Moses leading our people to freedom, said the blessing over the wine and the bread, but then he added something:

He said the bread was his body, and the wine was the blood of the new covenant, poured out for us. This was something new - and it didn't sound very nice! No good Jew has anything to do with blood when we can help it - it's not right, even I knew that. But there was something so sad about his face, we took the bread and the wine, and we ate and drank. "Whenever you eat this bread, or drink this cup, remember me," he said. And I've never forgotten. Because that was the last time I saw Jesus.

That very night, Jesus was arrested and taken to court, accused of blasphemy against God and treason against Rome. They sentenced him to death. They killed my Jesus!

I asked my Father, then: "Why didn't the people stop it? Why didn't *you* stop it!" He held me as I cried, and he said, "We tried, Anna, we really did. But the people around us were yelling, 'Crucify him!' And we couldn't stop them."

It was the saddest day of my life. I will always, ALWAYS, remember it. And I will remember those people - those same people, that crowd that yelled "Hosanna" one week, and "Crucify" the next. And I ask myself, could I ever be like that? Could I change my faith in someone so quickly because I didn't like what they said, or they did something I didn't like? Father always said they wanted a king, and they got a man of peace - they wanted a revolution, and they got a crucifixion. I don't know. What I do know is, that I made a

promise that awful night, never, ever, to betray Jesus - what I learned from him, the person he was - and to always, ALWAYS remember.