Churches celebrate Palm Sunday in different ways. In one of my previous churches where we had a number of children, we lined up in the parish hall and then marched through the parking lot, waving palms, singing and shouting “hosanna”, led by our guitar playing director of music, before entering the church. A Palm Sunday procession has become an important tradition in many churches. One Palm Sunday when Dr. Walter Bruggemann was pastor of an inner city church, before becoming a world renowned Old Testament scholar, he and the rest of the congregation gathered on the street in front of his church. A young man living in the apartment house across the street threw up the window and shouted, “What's all that noise? You sound like the Salvation Army!” Dr. Bruggemann looked up at him and said, “Son, we are the salvation army!” What better way to sum up the events of the first Palm Sunday than to call it a salvation army parade? Jesus and his ragtag army gather outside the city gates of Jerusalem. The time has come. The day of salvation is at hand.

As Jesus and his disciples approach Jerusalem to confront their fate, they stop to visit their dear friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus who live in Bethany, a village just a few miles to the east of the city. Jerusalem could be seen for miles in all directions. From a distance the city seemed so peaceful. Still, from this vantage point Jesus realized that his earthly life was soon coming to an end. “The hour has come,” Jesus tells his followers. Notice, first of all, the high hopes of those who accompanied Jesus into the city. No sooner had the two disciples returned with the colt Jesus had requested than a crowd appears, and the crowd was in the mood for a celebration. There was excitement in the air. Some spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut “leafy branches”, placing them on the road. There was singing and shouting. The people were ready for a change. They wanted someone to lead them to a better life. They had high hopes. There is something very appealing about people with high hopes.

When Tommy Tighe was six years old he asked a local businessman for a loan of $500.00. The businessman wondered what Tommy intended to do with the money. Tommy explained that he wanted to make a bumper sticker, indeed a thousand bumper sticks, which said, “Peace, Please! Do It for Us Kids”,
signed Tommy.” Tommy had quite a story to tell. He had heard a tape that told would-be entrepreneurs to start selling at the top and that’s exactly where Tommy began. He convinced his father to drive him up to former President Ronald Reagan’s home. Without a moment’s hesitation Tommy rang the bell and soon the guard came out. Tommy gave a two-minute, irresistible sales presentation on his bumper sticker plan. The gatekeeper reached into his pocket, gave Tommy $1.50 and said, “Here, I want one of those. Hold on and I’ll get the President.” Later The Orange County Register did a feature story on Tommy where he was asked what he thought his impact would be on world peace. Tommy replied, “I don’t think I am old enough yet; I think you have to be eight or nine to stop all the wars in the world.”

Years later Tom Tighe went on to serve as Chief of Staff and Chief Operating Officer of the Peace Corp and today he directs a medical aid agency which has provided over 40 million dollars in grants and 4 billion dollars in medicine and medical equipment to poor people in 88 countries and all 50 states. Tom Tighe’s efforts may not have achieved world peace, but his work has without question made this world a better place. I believe God has a special fondness for people like Tom Tighe, people with high hopes who long to see a new world. That’s the way the people were who accompanied Jesus that first Palm Sunday; they had high hopes for a new world.

The problem with their high hopes was that they were short-sighted. They could not see the world from God’s perspective. God had a greater plan—a grander plan—than they could ever imagine. When the people along the way saw Jesus riding a colt approaching Jerusalem they immediately thought that he was entering the city to overthrow the established order. This was what they wanted; this was what they were hoping for. “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” rang out from everyone’s lips. And what does Hosanna mean? “Save us, deliver us!” The people were geared up and ready.

Still the action of Jesus was in direct contradiction to what the people hoped for. Jesus was riding a colt, a symbol of peace, not a horse, which signified war. Jesus approached Jerusalem as a humble servant and not as a mighty warrior king. The people were so preoccupied with the notion of political and economic
power that they were blind to what was taking place before them. God was at work in the world, but not in the way they expected, and so they missed what he was doing. That’s often true for us as well.

A good number of you were present for the third lecture in our Lenten series when Prof. Bob Barylski, a Russian expert, spoke about the almost miraculous revival of the Orthodox Church in Russia after 70 years of Communist suppression. In their book, *Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So*, the authors tell about the Reverend Olav Parnament who was a pastor in Estonia while the country was still under Soviet domination. Invited to speak at a gathering of evangelical pastors in the States, Parnament finally secured permission to travel to the U.S., but only as a private citizen. Carefully avoiding any public announcement of his address, Parnament spoke to his fellow pastors. He began by quoting a passage from Isaiah in which the prophet foretold the liberation of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus... I will go before you and level the mountains; I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron.” There was a long pause and then Parnament looked up and said, “Sometimes those iron bars are called the ‘Iron Curtain.’” Those present in the audience realized that they were hearing the voice of a modern-day prophet whose words would one day soon come to pass.

God is at work even when we are not aware of it. The crowds who hailed Jesus as he entered Jerusalem were looking for a conquering king. Jesus appreciated the peoples’ high hopes, but he knew that those hopes were shortsighted. God had a different plan, a plan that would change the world forever. This brings us to the final thing to be said for the morning.

It is easy to shout – it much harder to serve. Undoubtedly you have seen those bumper stickers which read “Honk if you love Jesus.” There was a follow up bumper stick which read, “Tithe if you love Jesus. Anyone can honk.” Everyone loves a parade, and it’s easy to get caught up in the excitement of the moment. We can be filled with a fresh burst of energy over an exciting, new project. Unfortunately our enthusiasm soon fades and we lose interest. It was great while it lasted but now it's gone. The truth is, it's easy to shout but it's hard to serve.
Those of you from Illinois are likely familiar the annual passion play that has been held in Bloomington for the past 95 years. Way back in 1951 a man named Harold Walters was set to play the part of Jesus. The day before the play was to open, Walters began to feel ill. He went to his doctor only to discover he was suffering from pneumonia – a much feared illness 60 years ago. After the examination his doctor warned Walters, “If you persist in going through with this play, it may cost you your life.” Harold thought long and hard over the doctor's words. He realized that if he was unable to perform his role at this late date, the Passion Play would have to be canceled and many people would be disappointed.

Walters pondered over and over again, “Why is this happening to me?” He wondered if his illness was God's way of telling him he that he should not be in the play. Then he thought of previous performances and the many hours where he lived as Jesus. “I poured my whole being into the part. I tried to think and act like Jesus would.” Then he asked himself the deciding question, what would Jesus do in his situation?

After much agonizing, Harold decided to go ahead with the performance against his doctor's orders. Walters had difficulty getting through the play, needing to lie down between acts. His fellow actors didn’t think he could make it. Walters wondered the same thing. His lines took on new meaning as he was near collapse when he shouted, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” “I had to forget myself, my pain, my fears, everything but being Jesus,” he recalled. Once he was able to do this, Walters said he received strength far beyond his own. The pain he was experiencing left his chest. His voice became stronger. “God poured his strength into me. For those sublime moments his divine Spirit was in me.” After a period of rest and recuperation, Walters returned to health, indeed he was back the following year again playing Jesus.

It's easy to shout; it's hard to serve. What the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem that day did not realize was that God was offering them an opportunity to join Jesus in doing a new thing. Rather than simply smashing the oppressive authoritarian rulers of the day, Jesus was beginning to build a new world order. He was starting with a small group of men and women, “a ragtag salvation army” you might even say, which would grow person by person through the ages until it transcended all the governments of this world.
That ragtag army now numbers in the billions and it is still growing. It is building schools and universities, hospitals and soup kitchens. It is healing the wounded and setting at liberty captive peoples. It is bringing people from darkness into light. That salvation army is, of course, the church of Jesus Christ. That is why we lift up our anthems of praise this day. That is why we are shouting, “Hosanna!” Jesus is still leading his ragtag salvation army until that day when oppression is no more and everyone lives in dignity and peace and freedom together under the Lordship of Christ. Can he count on you? Are you ready to join in the salvation army? It's easy to shout, but what Jesus needs is people willing to serve.