

"YOU BET YOUR LIFE"
April 8, 1990

TEXT: Matthew 21:9 "And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest.'"

Some years ago, when I was both younger and more adventurous than I am today, I did something that nearly resulted in tragedy, perhaps even death, for me and for my family. It was July of 1965, and we were moving from a suburb of Boston to Oklahoma City, where I had my first college teaching job. To save money, Peggy and I did most of the packing ourselves. And we rented a U-Haul trailer for some of the heavier, but less bulky, items.

Since I had never driven with a trailer before, I was pretty careful when we first started out. But, as the hours passed, I grew more and more comfortable and, perhaps, a little less cautious. At any rate, somewhere in the Catskill Mountains of New York, we came up over a hill and around a curve, and there --right in front of me-- was a line of cars, stopped in the middle of the road, waiting for a work crew to make some repairs.

Without thinking much about it, I put my foot on the brake, but, to my surprise, we hardly even slowed down. The brakes were all right --I could feel the resistance in the pedal-- but the weight of that trailer was just too much for them. We were victims of Newton's second law of motion. Bodies in motion tend to stay in motion unless some outside force is applied. And the greater the mass, the greater the force must be.

I felt a sudden panic, as I checked out my options. They were not good. I could plow into the car in front of me. Or I could swerve into the other lane and hit a car that was coming from the other direction. Or I could go off the road to the right and slam into the side of the mountain. Not a very pleasant prospect, especially with a heavy trailer behind us. By then, however, I could feel the car beginning to slow down ever so slightly, so I stayed in line and, almost miraculously, edged to a stop about a foot short of disaster. Without meaning to, I had bet my life --and the lives of my family-- when I overloaded that trailer.

Now, what does that have to do with Palm Sunday? Well, like cars, lives, too, are effected by momentum. Call it habit, call it psychological conditioning, call it whatever you want,

we, too, tend to follow the same path unless we have a strong reason not to. And I suggest that that is the way it was on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus rode down the Mount of Olives, into the valley of the Kidron, and up to the city of Jerusalem. Whether they knew it or not, the Jews, their Roman oppressors, and Jesus, himself, were all like heavy trailers rolling down a steep grade. They had choices but their choices were limited by their past.

Consider the Jews, for instance. For centuries they had been loading their "trailers" with dreams of a messiah. The Son of David they called him. And they were totally convinced that, when he came, he would be like the first David, a mighty warrior who would crush their enemies and lead them back to their rightful place in the sun. Generations of oppression had sharpened their longing till it influenced everything they said or did.

So, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, the momentum of their dream took over. They met him with branches and shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" just as they had when Judas Maccabaeus overthrew the Syrians two centuries before.

But their hopes were soon disappointed, for Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that they wanted. They should have known that when they saw him riding in. The late William Barclay writes, "In Palestine the ass was not a despised beast. The ass was a noble beast. When a king went to war he rode on a horse, when he came in peace he rode on an ass." But the thrust of their dream was so great they could not see what Jesus was showing them. When they finally understood, they turned on him and demanded his death.

But that was not the end of it. Like my U-Haul trailer, the load they carried kept hurling them on toward disaster. Having rejected the Prince of Peace, their dreams of rebellion brought them to destruction. Two generations later, a full-scale revolt brought upon their heads the terrible wrath of Rome.

Josephus, one of their own historians, describes it this way: "Now as soon as Titus' army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury . . . Caesar gave orders that they should now demolish the entire city and temple. . . . This was the end which Jerusalem came to . . ." When it was all over, not one stone remained upon another, and over one-and-a-half million Jews had lost their lives. They bet their lives upon their dream --and lost.

But the Romans, too, were victims of momentum. In their early days of the Republic, all they really wanted was to keep the peace. Yet somehow, like the gun-fighters of our own wild West, every new conquest just seemed to bring forth more and

more challengers. Eventually, they became obsessed with control. Total, absolute control. Certainly they were not going to let this upstart carpenter rock their boat. Pilate may have had a choice, but it turned out to be a slim one. All the priests had to do was say, "If you release this man you are not Caesar's friend," and Pilate caved in. He had to. Momentum --set in motion by his own choices and by centuries of choices before him-- was just too much for him to resist.

But Rome also paid a price. After centuries of cruelty and war, and the lust for pleasure so often spawned by war to its horrors, Rome, herself, fell to invaders. Jesus warned that those who live by the sword would die by the sword. And a few Romans heard, but not enough. The others bet their lives on dreams of power, and they, too, lost. Pressured by hostile nations from without and rotting away from within, the conqueror, herself, was conquered.

But momentum is not all bad. There was momentum to Jesus' life, too. All his life he had been loading -his- "trailer" with dreams of obedience. Obedience to the will of His Father. We see that for the first time when he was only twelve. His parents had taken him to Jerusalem for the Passover and, on the way home, discovered he was missing. In panic they rushed back to the city where they found him in the temple, sitting with the teachers, listening and asking questions. And, when they asked him why he had treated them so badly, he answered in surprise, "Why is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house." [Luke 2:49]

We see his obedience again in John's gospel, when he told his disciples, "I have food of which you do not know . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." [John 2:32-34] And we see it most of all in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, every human instinct urged him to put on the brakes, to go back to Galilee in safety. "My Father," he said, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" But then the momentum of his life took over, and he added, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt." [Matthew 26:39] His whole life had been preparing him for that moment. And, when the moment came, he was ready.

He was ready, too, when temple guards came to arrest him and haul him away like a common criminal. He was ready before the high priest and again in front of Pilate. He was ready when they nailed him to a cross and his life slowly drained from his body. He was ready because all his life he had been loading his "trailer" with obedience. And the momentum of that load carried -him-, just as -theirs- carried his enemies. Surely, no one could have faced what Jesus faced without that kind of help. Jesus could not and neither can we.

And that brings us to the big question. What kind of momentum does your life have? What have you been filling it with? Where is it carrying you? And what kind of momentum are

you giving to the lives of those you love: your children, your friends, your grandchildren? What are you loading them with? When crisis comes will it give them strength and patience and endurance? Or will it lead them to destruction? I set the stage for a potential accident, not when I crossed over the top of that hill, but when I put too much of the wrong kind of thing in my trailer forty-eight hours earlier. What are you putting into your trailer? Is it worth betting your life on?