

## “A Tale Of Two Palm Sundays”

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Mark II:1-11 = grand reversal of the Gospel

**P**alm Sunday 1865, exactly 153 years ago today, in a small farming community in Virginia, the once mighty armies of the North and South, now ragged bands, wearily form up battle ranks. The Confederates are surrounded, outnumbered 10 to 1. They haven't eaten in two days.



General Sheridan wants to massacre the Confederates without mercy. Grant knows that they needed the goodwill of those same men and officers to rebuild the torn nation. Grant sends word to Lee to meet.



Meet they do at a farmhouse in Appomattox. Lee arrives on Traveler, his best horse, in his best dress uniform complete with sword. Grant in contrast is in a private's uniform, no sign of rank at all. Grant is unkempt, his uniform blood spattered.

They exchange small talk. Both are West Point graduates, the same class of 1846, 10 Confederate and 12 Union Generals from that class. Served together under Winfield Scott in Mexico.

Lee and Grant share some small talk about the Mexico campaign. Then to the business at hand ~ the surrender of the Army of the Confederacy. Grant chooses generous terms. Lee is in no position to quibble. Grant wants only decommission of the weapons and equipment, and the soldiers simply return home.



Lee politely points out that in the Southern Army the officers provide their own horses. Lee requests they be allowed to take their horses home as they were needed for plowing. Grant agrees. They part, and this war which had ripped our nation's heart in two and taken an unimaginable toll, the war was over. The long and desperate process of reconstruction was to begin.

On Palm Sunday 1836, exactly 29 years earlier, Santa Ana's Army of Mexico attacked Goliad. After fierce fighting, 500 rebels surrendered to Santa Ana. The 500 had been promised transfer to prison ships. Instead, they were massacred.



Under orders, the Mexican Army began to shoot the prisoners. When bullets ran out, they began to club the prisoners. Many officers and soldiers refused. A

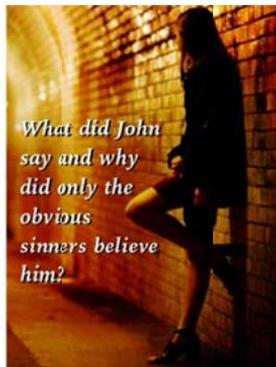
Mexican prostitute pled with the officers to spare the men. History remembers her as the Angel of Goliad, for her pleas saved more than 100 men.



General Houston rallied the soldiers at San Jacinto with the rallying cry: "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!" meaning if Santa Ana left the field alive the rebel soldiers were dead men.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Matthew 21:31-32



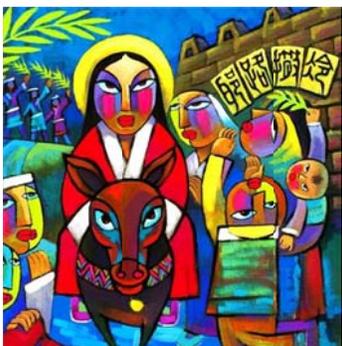
The massacre in Goliad has interesting parallels in Jesus' words:

**"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."** [Mt. 21:31b]

This is the radical nature of the Gospel: **"the first shall be last and the last shall be first,"**<sup>1</sup> **"the meek shall inherit the earth,"**<sup>2</sup> and a prostitute will obtain mercy for a hundred prisoners. Surprise is God's business. Surprise is the essence of the Gospel.



This surprising contrast is never more clearly drawn than that day ~ the Palm procession when Jesus entering Jerusalem on a Sunday 2000 years ago.



The account of Holy Week in the Gospel of John emphasized the atoning death of Jesus as substitute for us and our sins. In contrast, the Gospels of Luke and even more Mark, emphasize something completely different: a great reversal between the present world and the realm of God.

**"The greatest among you will be a servant."** [Mk. 10:43]

“Your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey.” [Zech. 9:9]

In Luke and even more in Mark, Jesus’ mandate is for us to become the vanguard for a whole new world ~ in complete contrast with the present age ~ a reversed realm, a realm where the powerful now are weak and violent warring madness is transformed into Shalom, true peace with prosperity shared by all.



The peace hard fought and hard won at Appomattox on Palm Sunday 153 years ago today, this peace is but a prelude to the peace offered all of us at Easter. Then the massacre at Goliad, on Palm Sunday 182 years ago today. As the massacres at the Alamo and Goliad were just leading to the battle of San Jacinto, an interlude before the final victory ~ Palm Sunday is a mere foreboding of Easter.



Surprise is God’s business. We should always be ready to be surprised by God. As a final twist:

At the beginning of the Civil war, the Southern forces were moving on Washington. The first major battle of the War, the Battle of Bull Run, took place on a farm of a certain Wilmer McClain. Fearing for the safety of his family, McClain moved wife, children and household to safer surroundings in Southwest Virginia. The place where he settled, far from the troubles of war, was, of all places, the village of Appomattox. The Civil War quite literally started on his front yard and ended at his living room.



Never forget: if we are no longer surprised by God, then we are no longer living in the Gospel realm.

**T**he Gospel is a marvelous, mysterious surprise. Surprise like a prostitute saving a hundred souls. Even more, surprise like despised ones, prostitutes and tax collectors, entering God’s realm ahead of the high and mighty. All God’s plan.



Surprise like General Lee, even in defeat, maintaining real dignity. Even more, surprise like Jesus, crucified and buried, yet “on the third day he rose again from the grave,” and snatches dignified triumph out of the jaws of crucified tragedy. All God’s plan.

Surprise like the Angel of Goliad setting prisoners free. Even more, surprise like Jesus descending to the abode of the dead, and in rising Jesus set all those prisoners free. All God’s plan.

According to plan, the Messiah, the one expected, dies ~ dies seemingly before completing the mission. But the greatest surprise of all is: “Jesus lives.”

**T**he Gospel is surprise. The Gospel is even more about change ~ changed lives and changed societies. The Gospel changes our expectations ~ raises them with Jesus. The Gospel transforms our lives ~

“God continues to reach into the graves we dig for ourselves and pulls us out,”<sup>3</sup> transforming us into new persons capable of living and building God’s new age.

The inspiring cry went up: “Remember the Alamo. Remember Goliad.” That drove soldiers on to victory. So it is wise for us to always remember the Gospel so that it may drive us always and ever forward into God’s realm.



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<sup>1</sup> Mk. 9:35

<sup>2</sup> Mt. 5:5

<sup>3</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*