One Sunday evening some years back I received a word from God...not in any spectacular or sensational way - no burning bush, no blinding light, no voice from the heavens - but a voice nevertheless. As usual I was exhausted from the day’s activities at church. Lying on the couch watching TV, I fell into a deep sleep, when suddenly, I was awakened by some words wafting into my ear as if from a dream – three words that I will never forget: “Follow your bliss.” Now no longer sleepy, I suddenly snapped into a state of heightened awareness. Follow your bliss? I liked the sound of that, but what did it mean?

As I focused on the TV screen, I saw two men sitting across from each other in a study lined with books, animatedly discussing matters of the spirit. It was Bill Moyers, the well-known journalist, interviewing Joseph Campbell, an eminent scholar and teacher, a foremost authority on myths and religion throughout the world. Bill Moyers had apparently just asked Joseph Campbell what was the most important step that we can take on our spiritual journey. And Campbell, grinning, had replied, “Follow your bliss!” The phrase took on a life of its own after that. Campbell was suggesting, “Follow your dream, your heart’s desire, your passion. Fulfill in your life what you came here to do and to be. Don’t get lost in ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts,’ in expectations from the outside. Go deep within, and find out what the voice of God is calling you to do, and do it! Follow your bliss!”

“Follow your bliss!” The dictionary defines bliss as “serene happiness, spiritual joy, ecstasy, delight, pleasure.” Jesus was certainly following his bliss as he rode into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. For Jesus was following the inner call of God, and that, for Jesus, was bliss. Bliss also describes the mood of the crowd who lined the streets of Jerusalem to greet Jesus as he rode in on his donkey. Here was one beautiful, bright moment in the life of Jesus Christ and his followers, a moment of glory, of victory, of power. Luke tells us, “The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully and with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen” (19:37).

Imagine for a moment that you had been one of those disciples standing on the side of the road. You have been following Jesus around day after day for several years now. And each day you have watched him heal people, restore sight to the blind, make the lame walk, cast out evil spirits, transform tax collectors and adulterers, and even raise people from the dead. All these weeks and months you have marveled at this man. But never
before this Palm Sunday have you had the chance to let out your unabashed JOY for all he has done. Now you have that chance.

Of course there are always some people who are embarrassed by wild displays of feeling. In this case, it was the Pharisees. “Teacher,” they said indignantly, “order your disciples to stop [shouting and carrying on].” But Jesus knew this bliss could not be stopped. It would be like stopping up a bottle of champagne once the cork has popped out. This was a genuine unleashing of the champagne of the Spirit, generously pouring out onto the dry, thirsty streets of Jerusalem. So Jesus told the Pharisees, “I can’t stop them. If they were silent, the very stones would shout out!”

But to understand Jesus’ bliss on that Palm Sunday simply as joyful, rapturous feelings would be misleading - because in the very next line of scripture, there are haunting words: “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it....” He wept over it. The city was breaking Jesus’ heart, because it did not recognize him nor did it understand the message of transformation that he brought. “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”

Don’t you imagine that we too make God weep sometimes? We still do not know the things that make for peace. We still disappoint God when we sin against each other with our rude and judgmental behaviors, or selfishness and greed, our sense of superiority, our tendency to turn a deaf ear to Jesus’ hard teachings. In the short span of a morning’s ride through Jerusalem, Jesus experienced the heights and the depths of his relationship with the human race. He went from joy and exultation to sorrow and tears. Jesus’ open heart included all of these feelings.

Today is known not only as Palm Sunday but also as Passion Sunday. Today we not only celebrate Jesus’ life, we also honor his courage and his love even as he faced death. Jesus’ suffering unto death, which he willingly experienced for the sake of love, we call the Passion – capital “P.” It’s important to remember Jesus’ Passion on this Sunday, because otherwise we might be tempted to skip right over to the joy of Easter and minimize Jesus’ struggle during his last week on earth - his lonely tears in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, his trial, his humiliation as he was stripped, beaten and crowned with thorns, and finally nailed to a cross and left to die.

To follow his bliss meant for Jesus to follow his passion - this path of love God had given him, through joy and through pain. This was the path he had first announced years before in the synagogue in Nazareth, quoting scripture from the ancient prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind [and] to let the oppressed go free...” (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus’ bliss was not simply good feelings. It was obedience to the deepest, truest voice within him, the voice of God. Are we willing to obey that same deep, true voice within us?

CNN has a program called “CNN Heroes of the Year” about ordinary people who follow their passion each day quietly and without fanfare and end up making a real difference in this world. There is undercover doctor, Jim Withers, who dresses like a homeless person, on purpose, two or three nights a week, rubbing dirt in his hair and muddying up his
jeans before taking to the dark streets of Pittsburgh, finding homeless people who need medical care. And Cathy Heying uses her skills in auto repair to help hundreds of low-income individuals to repair their vehicles at low cost, so that they can continue on the road to success. And Marilyn Price for three decades has helped at-risk kids use bikes to experience nature. Her non-profit, “Rides for Kids” now has 90 chapters worldwide and serves 15,000 kids a year. Musician Chad Bernstein started a non-profit, “Guitars over Guns,” pairing kids with professional musicians mentors in two of Miami’s poorest communities. His group has seen a steep rise in academic performance and school attendance of students in the program. All of these folks began with a simple passion and built it into a purpose that makes a difference in people’s lives.

You and I are called to follow our passion, as well. What is God’s voice saying to you? How is God leading you, through joy and through pain, toward your own deepest heart’s desire, your own simple purpose? Sometimes these leadings are so natural and down-to-earth that we may not connect them at first with the voice of God. Might God be asking you to spend more time with your child or your grandchild? Are you being asked to be more creative at your job or more supportive in your relationships? Or to be a peacemaker or a community organizer? Or a volunteer at the hospital, at Hospice or Habitat for Humanity? Are you being led to teach Sunday School or call your representative in Congress or get involved with the problem of hunger, poverty, racial discrimination, or homelessness? Are you simply being nudged to visit a neighbor in need?

What small acts of love and creativity will help you realize you’ve just added a little more light to the world? This is your bliss. Follow it! Every single day, follow it! There is nothing, absolutely nothing, more important for you to do. On the days you feel like giving up, remember Jesus as he wept for Jerusalem. We all in our own way must walk into the darkness of Jerusalem. Walk right into it. Did Jesus’ sadness over Jerusalem stop him? No, it actually only deepened his resolve to follow his purpose. Sometimes I hear, “But I can’t do anything special. I’m not gifted in any special way.” And all I can think of is a woman I met in a nursing home, confined to her bed, who told me that her purpose in life, from morning till night, was to lie in that bed and pray for people. What a calling! What single-mindedness! This woman, and all the men and women like her, are quietly helping God to hold our world together in love.

Let’s follow Jesus this Palm Sunday by following our passion, our purpose for being here. Even when our purpose leads us into the deepest darkness of Jerusalem, let us resolve to keep going, to do those things that bring God’s light into our world. And then...just listen! If you’re very quiet, you may just hear the stones silently cry out for joy!

Let us pray. O Lord of Bliss, teach us to follow our bliss, to follow Jesus into Jerusalem, to fill the world with your light and your love. All glory, laud and honor be unto you! Amen.