

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29  
Matthew 21:1-11

Palm/Passion Sunday, Year A  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
April 2, 2023

## **A King's Humble Ride**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Today's psalm is an appropriate reading for Palm Sunday, as it was originally used by a leader triumphantly entering the city and the sanctuary. Also, it is a psalm deeply rooted in the Jewish celebration of Passover, the festival around which much of the passion narrative revolves. And finally, part of the psalm was sung by pilgrims accompanying Jesus as they entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Listen to these words from Psalm 118:1-2, and 19-29 . . .

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

The mood of Palm Sunday is quite different from the Passion that follows Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The Passion of Christ refers to the suffering he endured during the last week of his life, from his entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to his crucifixion on Mount Calvary. Unlike the rest of Holy Week, on Palm Sunday there is a parade-like quality. All four gospel writers report an occasion of great acclamation. Three times Matthew mentions a donkey and a colt, on which Jesus will ride—a humble king who comes in peace. Listen to these words from Matthew 21:1-11 . . .

### *Sermon*

We see the authoritative lowliness of God in Jesus, who was born in a manger amongst the livestock, who became a carpenter, who submitted to baptism, who washed his disciples' feet, who allowed himself to be crucified on a cross between two thieves—for us and our salvation. Therein do we see the kingliness of lowliness in this One who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mk. 10:45)

Delores Dufner has written a hymn that is often sung at the end of the church year on Christ the King Sunday. But it's nonetheless appropriate for Palm Sunday. Its title is "O Christ, What Can It Mean for Us." Listen to the words of the first verse:

O Christ, what can it mean for us to claim you as our king?  
 What royal face have you revealed whose praise the church would sing?  
 Aspiring not to glory's height, to power, wealth, and fame,  
 you walked a different, lowly way, another's will your aim.

Our opening hymn this morning was the familiar "All Glory Laud and Honor," which speaks of children offering sweet hosannas to the humble king who rides into Jerusalem. And our Gospel Lesson tells of the crowds going ahead of Jesus, spreading their cloaks on the road, and some spreading branches. There were people ahead of him and behind him and they shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
 Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mt. 21:9b)

The word *hosanna* is taken from Psalm 118: 25. We read the verse earlier this morning in our psalm. The Hebrew phrase was *hoshiya na* (ho SHEE ah NAH), or *hosanna*. One rendering of the phrase is "Save us now," or "Save, I pray." It was a cry for help; like you might yell if you were pushed off a diving board, before you had learned to swim—"Help! Save me!"

But by the first century the meaning of *hoshiya na* had changed. In the psalm it was followed immediately with the declaration:

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.  
 We bless you from the house of the Lord. (v. 26)

So the cry for help was answered almost before it left the psalmist's mouth. And over time the cry for help ceased being a cry for help in the ordinary language of the Jewish people; instead it became a shout of hope and exultation, something like a religious "hurrah!" While it used to be

a cry for help, it became a declaration of praise and salvation. And that's what is meant by the Hosannas of Palm Sunday:

“Hooray to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest!”

The irony that emerges from this crowd of jubilant people is found in the false expectation that Jesus will immediately restore the fortunes of Jerusalem, and yet they are right that he is king. But his kingdom is not of this world, yet is other and more than they could imagine. This king does not ride on the mighty horse in military splendor. The scene would be a clear contrast with the parade of missiles and armaments in North Korea, Iran, Russia, or China. Jesus rides on a donkey, a common means of transportation in Jerusalem—a long-eared daily sight. I miss seeing the donkeys here at Midway, back there in the pasture, protecting the cattle from the coyotes.

Hear the first two verses of Henry Milman's 1827 Palm Sunday hymn, “Ride on, Ride On, in Majesty”:

Ride on, ride on, in majesty!  
Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry.  
thy humble beast pursues its road  
with palms and scattered garments strowed.

Ride on, ride on, in majesty!  
In lowly pomp ride on to die.  
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin  
O'er captive death and conquered sin.

The irony is that the kingship of Jesus will be marked by a cross rather than a throne. The Son of David enters David's Jerusalem, but the only throne that awaits him is a cross. And sadly, the crowd's joyous Hosannas will shortly become, “Crucify him!”

That's similar to what can happen today when our hopes are not immediately fulfilled. When our prayers are not answered in the way we wanted. When the help we receive is not the kind we expect, and comes to us in a different guise than had looked for, and thus we reject it. Jesus still fails to fulfill the expectation of One who will immediately solve all of our problems, or tell us exactly what to do.

Ernest Hunt, former Rector of the Church of the Epiphany in New York City, tells about an experience in ministry he once had in the Salinas Valley in California. Rev. Hunt became acquainted with many of the young ranch families. He says that most had gone to universities and had returned to the land of their fathers and mothers to carry on the work of large estates.

One young family had three children, and after a normal bout with the flu, the youngest boy became listless for too long and was unable to regain his energy. He was taken to the doctor again, and it was discovered that his white blood cell count was abnormally high, and his illness was eventually diagnosed as leukemia. He was nine years old, and Hunt would never forget the brave little boy. Those were trying days for his parents, and while both were broken-hearted, they were initially hopeful, especially the father, because new drugs—which now cluster under the name chemotherapy—were going to be used. The little boy did respond for a while and he did go into remission, but less than a year later he weakened and was placed in the hospital for the last time. Amazingly, the mother became stronger, but the father fell completely apart; his whole attitude turned to one of bitterness.

When the boy died, peacefully in his sleep, Rector Ernest Hunt was with the mother. The father did not go near the hospital. And after the burial, he rejected his wife and family. It seemed to him that the loss of the boy was a personal insult, because his death was something he could not control. It was beyond him; in spite of his strong outward bearing, he was unprepared to accept this heartache and allow God to lead him through it.

Sooner or later most of us experience that kind of heartache. At a loved one's death. With an illness that doesn't heal. With an agonizing divorce. With the loss of a job or the loss of the ability to work. At the inability to pay our bills. And some turn from God, angry that he has allowed such to happen. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian, was a man of great faith. But even so, he was hung at the Flossenbürg concentration camp a month before the end of World War II, the last of his "Stations on the Road to Freedom."

My friends, as we enter Holy Week, this last week in the earthly life of our Lord, let us join the parade with our own Hosannas. Let us rejoice in the faithful Son, who saves us from sin, fear, and hopelessness. But let us be aware of how easy it is for those Hosannas to stop when our hopes and prayers are not immediately fulfilled. Let us learn from Jesus to incorporate humility, pain, and loss into our lives. Let us not go away when the going gets tough. Let us stay with Jesus throughout his passion—Maundy Thursday, sharing communion with his disciples in the upper room before his betrayal; Good Friday, with his crucifixion on the cross; and then when all hope seemed lost, the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. And let us continue to stay with Jesus all the days of our lives.

"Will you also go away?"

"To whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:67-68)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.