

Palm Sunday

April 9, 2017

Matthew 21:1-11 – ¹As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²telling them, “Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. ⁸A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. ⁹The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting: Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹And the crowds were saying, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Introduction

Sometimes we talk about things starting out all fine and dandy but going quickly downhill from there. “How’d your presentation go?” “Well, it started out okay, but then I forgot one of the major points and it got me all flustered and I barely made it out alive!” “How was your dinner at that new restaurant?” “Well, we got seated right away – and the appetizer was pretty good – but the main course was horrible and we didn’t even stick around for dessert.” “How are things going on the home front?” “Well, let’s just say that the honeymoon’s definitely over!” The list could go on and on how things often go from good to bad or from bad to worse.

Theme: Hosanna in the Highest!

A fair number of people would characterize Holy Week that same way. They’d say that from Palm Sunday to Holy Saturday, Jesus went from riding the crest to utter defeat. I personally don’t feel that way. Palm Sunday was a high point, but the institution of the Sacrament on Thursday was just as much up there. The victorious shout of “It’s finished” on Friday signifies the culmination of God’s plan of salvation. During the final day-and-a-half of the week, Jesus’ soul was together with his Father and all the triumphant saints in heaven’s glory. Only one thing would make it better, and that would happen in the early morning hours on the first day of the next week.

As we meditate on the events of the first day of Holy Week this Palm Sunday, we want to focus on some of the words shouted by the pilgrims to and citizens of Jerusalem: **HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST!** As we’ll see, that’s a **cry that betrays hidden glory**. And that’s a **cry that stirs God’s people**.

Part I: ...is a cry that betrays hidden glory.

Perception and reality are often at odds, aren’t they? Things just aren’t always as they appear. That’s true of every book or movie in the mystery-thriller genre. That’s equally true of so much of everyday life. Jesus used the example of whitewashed tombs. The old west had its false-fronted buildings. The wide world of sports has its secrets. Politics has its hidden agendas. Personal health and beauty has its ways of lifting and tucking and covering up blemishes.

Things about Jesus weren’t always as they appeared. Perception often blurred reality. But on that first Palm Sunday, we hear a cry that betrays hidden glory. **“As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, telling them, ‘Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.’ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your king comes to you, humble, and**

riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it." In the people's cry and in these verses, we see perception and reality at odds.

On the one hand, Jesus has a glory that's, for the most part, hidden. The first part of the lesson from Philippians talks about what's been called Jesus' *state of humiliation*. That's the time when he chose to not make use of all the glory and majesty that's his by right. He never gave up his divinity – he never lost his divine characteristics – but he took on the nature of a servant and humbled himself. He hid the fullness of his deity for thirty-three years.

And so, at times, we see a hungry and a thirsty and a physically exhausted Jesus, even though he's Almighty God. We see him growing in wisdom, even though he's all-knowing. We see him battered by Satan's temptations, even though his holiness is eternally secured. We hear how the Son of Man had no place to lay his head, even though heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool. We read in Isaiah how **"he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him,"** though he is and remains the light of the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. We see it in today's Gospel, as he used common beasts of burden to serve as his far-from-luxurious borrowed ride into the capital city. He was a far cry from the people's perception of a king who'd deliver them from the Romans.

And yet they shouted their hosannas to the Son of David. In the midst of the humble entrance, Jesus' glory is made evident. First of all, he shows a glimpse of his omniscience. He knew about the donkey and her colt in the village up ahead. He anticipated that someone would ask the disciples what they were doing and he gives them the words to say.

When it comes right down to it, though, the events of Palm Sunday happened as fulfillment to Scripture. Once again, Jesus is revealed as the promised Savior. Shortly before Holy Week, Jesus had told his disciples, **"We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled."** There were no random or coincidental events that occurred that week. Everything took place exactly according to plan, and exactly as the Old Testament had foretold. Did Jesus specifically intend to demonstrate his humility by riding on the back of a donkey? Or was it simply because the prophet Zechariah had said it would happen that way? In either case, it's clear that there's much more about Jesus than what's visible on the surface.

He *is* in fact the King of the ages! He's the eternal monarch from the house of David. He's the promised Deliverer, who would save the world – not from political oppression, but from hell's domain. The people who lined the street may not have realized the full implications of what they were shouting, but it was the truth nonetheless.

Transition

Here, at the beginning of this Holy Week, sing **"Hosanna in the highest"** to your King. Look upon Jesus not as someone whose week is about to go quickly downhill, but as someone who's about to fulfill everything that's been written about how God was going to save a world of sinners from their sins. That cry of **"Hosanna"** betrays Jesus' hidden glory. It's also a cry that stirs God's people.

Part II: ...is a cry that stirs God's people.

Think back to the Nativity story. The magi followed the star to Jesus' house, where they paid him homage. And do you remember how King Herod reacted to their questions about how to find the newborn King? He was threatened; he was jealous. And the way things almost always worked, if cruel King Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy! We hear how **"he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."** They realized Herod was going to blow a gasket about this rival king. And then look out!

Now, thirty-plus years later, the whole city of Jerusalem is in a commotion again. **“A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting: Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, ‘Who is this?’ And the crowds were saying, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’”**

In their case, it’s easy to understand the excitement. Jerusalem was full of pilgrims for Passover. The well-known Jesus was reported to be on the way in. An impromptu parade was organized. The crowd was caught up in the moment. They were stirred up by the possibilities of what could potentially happen that weekend.

I hope our united cries of **“Hosanna”** are just as stirring for you today. People of God, this is what it’s all about! As we contemplate the events of this coming week, we see the things that rouse us to offer up our praise. We see all the things that move us to gospel-induced action. We see our sins – the very ones that earned us an eternity in hell – being borne on the shoulders of God’s chosen One, the Son of David. We look ahead and see how the **“author and perfecter of our faith...endured the cross, scorning its shame.”** We see how he paid the full price for our redemption. And yes, we catch those brief glimpses of Easter, hiding just over the horizon. And so we’re stirred up with unending gratitude and praise.

Conclusion

The Lutheran church is a liturgical church. We value an order of service that finds its roots in millennia of Christian history. In some of our liturgies, we sing the words of the *Sanctus*, a two-thousand-year-old hymn of praise, first sung by worshipers on Palm Sunday. Those words always precede our celebration of the Sacrament. There, too, we receive our King in a most personal and wonderful way. He doesn’t come to us in pomp and circumstance, but his glory is hidden in, with and under common bread and wine. He comes to stir up his people giving us his very body and blood for forgiveness and the peace that comes along with it. He comes to save, for that’s what the word *hosanna* means. So, **“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** Amen.