

“HOSANNA--GOD HELP US!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

In our gospel lesson for this morning we encounter a scene surely familiar to us from past years—Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt, greeted with loud hosannas, as well as palms and garments strewn in his path. The occasion for Jesus’ triumphant entry into ancient Israel’s capital city is the Festival of Passover. To this day, Passover remains one of Judaism’s great religious celebrations, commemorating the deliverance of the Jewish people from the yoke of slavery in Pharaoh’s Egypt under the leadership of Moses. As it turns out, God has chosen this very precious and holy time to further reveal through Jesus how humankind is to be delivered from sin and death.

Prior to Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem, many of those greeting Jesus had already heard of him. Word of his miracle-working ministry had spread widely. Thus, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, a city associated with the fabled King David, men, women, and children reached out to Jesus with high hopes and expectations. Perhaps, many thought, here was the one foretold by prophets who, born in Bethlehem and coming from the lineage of King David, would redeem Israel from its present foreign oppression and every other ill besetting it. Yes, the folks greeting Jesus from the roadside were eager to believe that Jesus was a divinely appointed and anointed servant ready to help them.

In our own age and time, we often hear the lament: *Where have all the heroes gone?* In fact, too many people in positions of power, authority, and leadership seem to be plain opportunists, out for themselves, rather than working for the common good. Well, very similarly, ancient Israelites regarded their leaders are near-hopeless too. Many of them viewed the mess in Jerusalem as we might view our mess in our state and national capitals.

Years earlier, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah had cried out against the waywardness and corruption of his nation’s political and religious establishment with these poignant and immortal words:

“For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah 6:13-14)

At the moment in Israel’s history when Jesus was walking, then riding, into Jerusalem, the situation was no less grim. The land of God’s chosen people was under the thumb of the Romans, who had conquered all the shores north and south of the Mediterranean Sea. Also reigning locally with the permission of the Romans was an evil and despotic dynasty of Herodian kings, who were not even authentic Jews. Both Roman and Herodian rule was brutal, rife with injustice. Poor people were being taxed to death to finance the forces of Roman occupation. In other words, folks were being forced to pay for their own

oppression. The very presence of Roman legions within and around Jerusalem's city walls was regarded by most Jewish citizens a spiritual defilement of the City of David and a disgrace to their nation's proud heritage. Although it was dangerous to protest, there was keen hope on the part of Jesus' fellow Jews that God might intervene to bring both Roman rule and the greed of their leaders to an end.

Not insignificantly, the Hebrew word *hosanna* that greeted Jesus on his approach to Jerusalem literally means "Help us!" Consequently, as men and women laid palms and garments along Jesus' path, they were essentially saying, "Help us, Jesus, help us! Give us the leadership we need to take back our country... Restore our nation to godly ways. Make us once again proud as we once were in the days of King David."

The gospel offers no explicit insights into Jesus' thoughts on that fateful day of hosannas. However, it seems clear that Jesus was well aware of what was in hearts and minds of his own Jewish people as he so fatefully headed towards Jerusalem. Moreover, Jesus had actually sent his apostles ahead of him into the City of David to secure the colt or young donkey that he was to ride. This he did to fulfill ancient prophecy from the Bible's Book of Zechariah which joyfully anticipates the coming of the messiah "*humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of an donkey.*" (Mark 11:1-11; Zechariah 9:9) In God's reckoning, the donkey—very different from the steeds and stallions that Roman rulers rode--was intended to symbolize of a more godly and righteous-minded Israelite kingship.

At the same time, once he mounted the colt, Jesus' triumphal procession must have been bittersweet for him. As God's son, Jesus possessed incomparable foresight. He also knew the fickleness of crowds everywhere. They can love you one moment and despise you the next. Jerusalem had a particularly notorious reputation for treating God's prophets and servants rudely, even brutally. Indeed, as Jesus once lamented:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!" (Luke 13:34)

Truly, Jesus harbored no illusions. In his heart he already knew that many who might be so quick to embrace him had their own pre-conceived notions as to who he should be and what he should do, regardless of the more encompassing and universal mission that God had destined for him, focused on the salvation of humankind, rather than the political, social, and spiritual redemption of Israel alone.

Have you ever been lonely in a crowd? Casting my own eyes over the lovely scene on the Jerusalem road as Jesus rides astride the colt, I wonder if he doesn't experience a pang or two of loneliness in the knowledge that he is not only on a collision course with

Roman and Jewish establishments but also the expectations of the common people whom he cares most about. Unfortunately, as they shout hosanna and ask for help, they don't grasp the deeper help in God's grace that they really need—the help that Jesus alone can provide.

Still, one of the extraordinary things about Jesus that further discloses Jesus as God's true son is the courage and grace under pressure that he demonstrates. Unlike most men and women in public life, whether in times ancient or modern, Jesus does not let his head be turned by the adulation of a crowd. Nor does he flinch from God's purposes or cut his conscience to fit the latest fashions or fads. Instead, we see him prepared to stand alone, if necessary, over and against everyone's short-sighted expectations and outright misunderstandings. Yes, even in the face of conflict, pain, and threats to his life, which on the horizon and culminate on Calvary's cross, Jesus remains unwavering and undeterred in his commitment to serve God first and foremost. We see no hesitation in the way that Jesus spurs the colt forward on the last leg of the trek to Jerusalem.

In counseling us to follow Jesus' courageous example, our morning epistle lesson from Philippians describes Jesus beautifully. As the Apostle Paul writes:

"The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had, 'He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will gave up all he had took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death—his death on the cross. For this reason God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name.'"
(Philippians 2:5-9)

In this humbleness, Jesus displays both his total moral and spiritual integrity which is at the essence of his nature as our divine savior. Never caring about pomp and circumstance for his own sake, Jesus is a model of loving, righteous, faithful servanthood—a model that in God's grace we are all called to follow as his disciples.

As the parade of Holy Week begins, taking us right through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday to Easter, may we shout our own loud hosannas in greeting Jesus. Yet, as we do so, let's really open ourselves to the true help that Jesus provides—all that he taught us about the way to salvation for here and eternity. Following Jesus' teachings and example of righteousness, love, and humility, may we commit ourselves anew to be the people of spiritual integrity and abiding faith that in all times and places God calls his children to be.
Amen.

