

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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4/5/09

"A Sforzondo in the Gospel"

Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

[11:1] When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples [2] and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. [3] If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" [4] They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, [5] some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" [6] They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. [7] Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. [8] Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. [9] Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

[10] Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

[11] Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

DANGEROUS PALMS

What significant memories come to mind when you think of Palm Sunday? That's the question I have been asking everyone this week. Hands down the winning answer was a story about something that happened in this very church.

We're lucky in central Florida. We actually have palm branches to use on Palm Sunday. And a member of the choir told me about the year that the children were all given really big, really sharp palm branches to wave.

The Palm Sunday service began peacefully enough with the usual processional. But as the children walked down the isles waving those huge palm branches, in their enthusiasm they managed to whack everyone who had the misfortune of being anywhere near the isle seat.

That year the children certainly brought the pain and passion back to Palm Sunday! This year we made sure to specify small palm branches for our children to wave!

But, why do we do this? What's the point of it all? Why do we wave greenery at Jesus every year?

Some theologians have even suggested that we ought to do away with Palm Sunday. They say that we ought to make this Sunday Passion Sunday instead, a Sunday when we contemplate the sacrifice of the cross and the theme of pain and suffering. According to them this is a much more significant theme in the gospel, and many just don't attend the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services to hear the rest of the story.

There are other solutions to this problem.

The lectionary does give us the option of reading the entire Passion story on Palm Sunday. I have a friend, a Roman Catholic priest who actually did read all of the Scripture lessons for Palm Sunday. He said that once they had the procession of the palms and read all the Scripture readings there was no time left for a sermon or much of anything else!

I can appreciate the viewpoint of those who want to celebrate Passion Sunday. But, I would suggest that the Palm Sunday message is important as well.

It's a story we need to hear. The parade on Palm Sunday is no ordinary parade. And the Jesus who rides into Jerusalem is not what any of us expect in a Messiah.

A SFORZANDO IN THE GOSPEL

You may have noticed the odd contrast in our anthem this morning. We sang a rather happy tune that went, "Ride on, King Jesus. Ride on in majesty." We even joked in choir practice that it kind of sounded like a throwback from the sixties, "Right on, King Jesus."

But, then the words of the song take an unexpectedly somber note. In fact it seemed out of place as we sang, "Ride on to die." It was a turning point in the song. We sang the word die very loudly and then backed off of it quickly to finish with a robust finale.

What do musicians call that Mark?
That's spelled sforzando. That's Italian.

Actually, I interrupted Mark's trip to the beach yesterday to ask him about it. Mark handed the phone over to his wife, and together we figured out how to get enough information to look it up on Google. Yes Virginia, your pastor googles.

Anyway, a sforzando is always dramatic and unexpected. It gets our attention and interrupts the flow of things. And that's a good way to describe our Scripture lesson for today. It's a sforzando in the gospel story.

The parade we have for Jesus today is not just a ticker tape celebration of glory. It is a serious statement about a Savior who deliberately rode on to die.

That's what all that donkey business is about in our lesson for today.

I won't bore you with all the details but suffice it to say that many of the details in this story refer back to Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and stories about kings who rode into town on the back of a donkey.

We think of the donkey as a kind of comical, stubborn beast ... sort of like the donkey Eddie Murphy did the voice over for in the cartoon movie, Shrek. But, in Jesus' day the donkey was the steed of choice for the king who came in peace. When the king rode a donkey into town it was a sign that the conflict was over and the battle had been won.

The crowds got the message. They threw leafy branches and their outer garments on the ground before Jesus. And using the words of the Psalmist they cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

HOSANNA

The key to this passage is that rather odd word, "hosanna." It's not a word we use very often. In fact I bet the last time you used that word was Palm Sunday last year. What exactly does hosanna mean?

Well, loosely translated hosanna means "we pray for you to deliver us."

The crowds heard that Jesus might be the Messiah. He was coming into town with all the trappings of a Messiah. And so the common Psalm that pilgrims sang on their way into Jerusalem took on a new urgency and relevance. In essence they were crying, "God, save us!"

I wonder. How many of us are crying hosanna, "God, save us" as we enter Holy Week?

Scott Johnston, the pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City told of an event in which he met with some seventh graders in his church. They had scribbled questions they wanted to ask their pastor on 3 by 5 note cards.

One question came up more than most. "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?"

Scott said, "Being an annoying pastor I told them that before I would answer that question, they would have to answer a question for me." Scott asked, "Since salvation implies that God saves us from something, what does God save us from?"

What do you think the kids said? That's right. The kids answered hell. Good answer.

But, then the pastor pressed further and asked, "And what is hell? What would God save you from if God was really on the ball?"

And then, he said, the conversation got really interesting.

One girl raised her hand and said death. Another boy said that he wanted to be saved from his upcoming math test!

Another said that he wanted to be saved from peer pressure. And yet another said that he wanted to be saved from his parent's expectations. A shy member of the group said fear. I want God to save me from my fear.

Scott said that their comments gave a pretty good picture of what hell might look like to a seventh grader.

I wonder if we could be so honest. When we wave our palm branches and cry "God save us" what do we mean? How do we define salvation? What do we want to be saved from?

Hosanna. God save me from sickness and pain. Hosanna. God save me from a loveless marriage. Hosanna. God save me from depression. Hosanna. God save me from anger.

Hosanna. God save me from the terrorists. Hosanna. God save me from loneliness. Hosanna. God save me from boredom. Hosanna. God save me from my fears. Hosanna. God save me from economic disaster.

Feel free to add your own hosanna this morning. We all have those areas where we desperately need salvation.

NOT OUR KIND OF MESSIAH

But, does God really save us from all these things? Is salvation really about having our needs met? Or does salvation come to us in a way we don't expect?

Those who first sang this song of hosanna wanted to be saved from the Romans. They wanted a political Messiah who would deliver them from the heavy hand of the Roman occupation. But, it would soon become abundantly clear that Jesus was not that kind of Messiah.

Instead of taking up a sword against the Romans Jesus talked about taking up a cross for the salvation of the world. It was a salvation that the people could not understand or accept. And many who shouted Hosanna on Palm Sunday also shouted crucify him on Good Friday.

I wonder. Can we understand and accept the salvation that comes to us in Jesus? Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that the crowd wanted long ago. And I would suggest that sometimes Jesus is not the kind of Messiah that we want either.

Jesus does not promise us a rose garden filled with peace and prosperity. During Lent we have explored that theme in great detail. The road to salvation is cruciform in shape ... both for Jesus and for us.

But, there is salvation in the way of Christ. He does save us. Our cries of hosanna are not in vain. But, how does he save us? What does he save us from?

SALVATION IN SORROW

Let me lean on Scott Johnston again for a story that illustrates the point very well.

Scott said that this past March he was in a funeral home in Mora, Minnesota. The snow was swirling and the radio was warning of white outs on the road.

Scott wasn't worried so much about that. He had come home for his father's funeral.

You know how it goes. You try to make small talk with old friends, but you can't take your mind off the most significant but silent presence in the room. After a while it can get unbearable. It got that way for Scott.

He wrote,

"I wasn't sure whether I could stand being in that space much longer; and yet, I knew that this is where I had to be. It was precisely at that moment that two members of my congregation, Ann and Bob, walked into the funeral home." [Remember Scott's congregation is the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. It's quite a long way from Minnesota.]

He continued, "At that moment, my mind could not square their presence with my location. I looked away, and then I looked back. Sure enough, there they were, two representatives from the Christian household. It is impossible to describe the power of that moment. I felt... sort of... well... saved."

Scott's story reminded me of my own father's funeral back in 1985.

I still remember many of the people who came ... my friend the Roman Catholic priest, Collier Harvey, the executive presbyter of Fincastle Presbytery who took time out of a busy schedule to drive two hours to the funeral, and an old buddy from high school who was now a pharmacist in my home town.

There was a whole row of people who drove up for the funeral from the church I served at that time. It was as you might imagine one of the worst days of my life.

And yet, surprisingly enough even though I was in a fog of grief I can remember almost everyone who was there. God was present in their presence, and as the years have passed I too have come to see this as a kind of salvation in the midst of sorrow.

THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD

And isn't this what Palm Sunday is really all about?

In the final analysis, Palm Sunday is not about crowds shouting, “We’re number one!” It’s not about religious leaders saying, “We’re right about God and you’re wrong.” It’s not about proud nations flexing their military might.

It’s about the King of creation, our Lord and Savior riding into town on (of all things) a donkey. It is not what we expected or maybe even wanted. But, our lesson for today makes it abundantly clear. This was God’s plan from the very beginning.

It is a fulfillment of prophecy. The God who saves us is humble and rides a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9) The God who saves us weeps for us and with us and desires to gather us under His protective wings. (Luke 13:34)

The God who saves us has a human face, a profoundly human face.

This is the on unique belief that distinguishes Christianity from all other faiths. We hear it at the beginning of the story, and we hear it at the end.

God was in Christ. God has a human face. God cares about ordinary men and women like you and me. God loves the world.

RIDING INTO THE WORLD

Our God gets involved in this messy world. Our God is willing to sacrifice everything. The story is clear. Jesus knew what awaited him. He could have stayed away. His disciples urged him to stay away.

But, Jesus chose to resolutely ride toward Jerusalem. He didn’t try to go through the back door and avoid trouble with his enemies. No, Jesus rode through the front door with banners waving and horns blaring.

He was the Messiah. The secret that had been so well hidden in Mark’s gospel is now out. God’s Son does not stand aloof from the pain and suffering of the world. God’s Son rides right into the middle of it.

God’s Son always gets involved.

And I wonder. Maybe we too are called to ride boldly into Jerusalem even though we know it is the home of death and despair. Maybe we are called to mount up on our “donkeys” and bring hope to those who have lost all hope.

It’s not the kind of salvation we had hope for ... this call to mount up and courageously enter the suffering world. Those who are hurting won’t always welcome our parade. Some might even reject us.

And yet, when we ride on to “die” we find salvation along the way. We need to be reminded often don’t we? Salvation is found in body broken and blood shed.

Do we have the courage and the honesty to cry hosanna, “God save us” today? Are we willing to ride headlong into the dangerous town that rejects God’s message and stones the prophets?

Do we believe that instead of saving us from our worst fears God saves us in the midst of our fears?

Today we learn once again that salvation has a human face. Let us shout with the crowds, “Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”

And let us also listen closely to hear that strange sforzando of the gospel.

Ride on King Jesus. Ride on to die (sfz). [The choir will assist me with this!]

Amen.