

Camille Cook Howe  
Matthew 21:1-11  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023  
Palm Sunday  
Where are you headed?

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

---

Once upon a time there was a man from humble roots. He grew to be a wise and compassionate man. He would eat with anyone and often gathered large crowds for spontaneous feasts where he miraculously served from bottomless baskets. He could amaze people with his story telling, simple yet profound. He was able to heal people of disease and ailments when doctors cast them aside as lost causes. Remarkable as he was, he could still connect with the real people of the towns and villages because he was a real person. Just like them, his knees ached when he sat too long in the boat. His head hurt from squinting when the sun shone too brightly. And his feelings were hurt when people made false assumptions about him.

This man was a strange attractor, and many people came to considered themselves devotees of the way of living he was teaching. It was a curriculum based on loving other people, seeking higher callings, trusting in God's love, and not being afraid of death. This man was changing people's lives and reshaping communities, and some believed he was the long-awaited Savior of the World. But not everyone loved this man, the people in power were annoyed, and threatened, and angered by his non-conformist ways. They thought his message as nonsensical.

One day when he entered the big city of Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, thousands of people celebrated his arrival. The threw coats on the ground ahead of his donkey, they laid branches down for a makeshift carpet, and their shouts of praise enveloped him. City officials thought this unauthorized parade was highly offensive. They knew this outsider was not going to save anyone from anything but the only way for them to convince the foolish and sympathetic crowds was for them to stop him completely. They arrested him and put him on trial. There it was decided he should be killed in the most publicly humiliating and painful way possible, by crucifixion. Hanging from a wooden cross, he blessed those to his right and his left and then took his last breath

and died. His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and it was some 2,000 years ago that he took that fated ride on donkey.

In American churches, Palm Sunday can have a pre-Easter vibe to it, as though it were a little dress rehearsal for the real deal when we roll out all the lilies and the trumpets. After six long weeks, we are feeling ready to shut down the Lent machine and turn up the Easter joy. But technically Palm Sunday, remembering that entrance to the city where Jesus was going to be murdered, is only celebratory in what it theologically ushered in. They took his body from the cross and buried it in a tomb. Palm Sunday is not a good story. Palm Sunday is a bad story, which a few chapters later, has a good ending.

I suppose part of me is glad we haven't made it to Easter Sunday yet. It is the part of me that isn't really in the mood to look to empty tombs and rejoice when my news feed speaks of hill staffers stabbed in broad daylight, and migrants burnt to death in detention centers, and tornadoes crushing people in their homes, and nine-year-old children murdered in their Presbyterian schools. My desk at home, where I do much of my writing, looks out onto the front doors of an elementary school. I sat there one morning this week and watched those innocent kids, walked to school by their parents with their coats and their backpacks and their lunch boxes and their soccer balls in hand. And the sight of them just brought me to tears. Hosanna, save us!

The psalmist, writes, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" My questions this week are, "Where can we go from the evil? Where can we flee from the tragedy?" Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Palm Sunday reminds us that the people who followed Jesus along the road and called out for a Savior are not very different than us. They were people with hopes and passions and worries and fears and different measures of faith. They were people who faced tragedy and illness and natural disasters and suffering of all kinds. They were people who did not know just how things were going to end, yet who wanted to believe there was something out there that was worth living for, some good to done, some hope to cling to. They were people who did not yet use the label Christian, but they knew they wanted to be followers of the man riding on the donkey. Hosanna, save us!

In the prologue to Hans King's book *On Being a Christian*, he says, "This book was written not because the author thinks he is a particularly good Christian, but because he thinks being a Christian is a particularly good thing." On Palm Sunday, we are reminded that while it is a challenging call, that being a follower of Jesus Christ is a particularly good thing. Throughout the Christian year, we focus so much on the life and teachings of Christ. As we begin holy week, we must remember how his life ended, just what he did that was both the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate victory thus requiring our loyalties. For if he did live in this way, if he did die in this way, if he did rise from the dead in this way, then saying being a Christian is a particularly good thing is a gross understatement. Being a Christian rather is the only appropriate response. In the face of loss, of war, of murder, of anguish, of sorrow – maybe being a Christian is the only appropriate response to any of it. Because if there isn't a God, if nothing is out there redeeming creation, if no divine being is out there offering redemption and salvation to the world, then how would you ever get out of bed in the morning? Hosanna, save us!

Several years ago, Sports Illustrated had a story about Ben Comen, who they called the ‘slowest cross-country runner in America’. Ben ran cross country in high school and people from far and wide would come to watch him. Ben never made it to the podium for his running. His only trophy would have been a participation trophy. The article was titled, *‘Why do they come?’* It talked about the way the team and the parents and the community had come to embrace this runner and show up to watch his races. The article begins, *“Why do they come? Why do they hang around to watch the slowest high school cross-country runner in America? Why do they want to see a kid finish the 3.1 miles in 51 minutes when the winner did it in 16? Why do they cry? Why do they nearly break their wrists applauding a junior who falls flat on his face almost every race? Why do they hug a teenager who could be beaten by any other kid running backward?”*

Ben Comen has cerebral palsy, and his running is an act of defiance and courage and dogged optimism. His coach said, “Ben, despite falling and getting injured almost every race, has never once quit.” Ben said, “My choice to run cross-country was a true labor of love. While that might sound like a lazy cliché, the blessings of being able to be a part of a high school varsity team exposed me to both joy and pain in deep abundance. My sweat, the occasional blood, and scraps of my skin — and my every breath...felt like a living, smelly, and somehow holy sacrifice. With the lacing of my running shoes, I knew that part of the journey ahead would be, for me, a sacred offering of thanksgiving that embodied the gratitude for God’s gift of two legs and for the desire to compete. At the outset of every practice or race, I knew that a battle was about to begin.”

Why do they come? Maybe because Ben was such a visible reminder that you don’t have to be particularly good to do a particularly good thing. Maybe it was because Ben was such a display of grit and faith and heart. Maybe it was because they could witness with their own eyes someone, who no matter the pain, would not give up, and that was enough to give them hope. Maybe it was because their news feeds had all the heartache they could handle for the week and they wanted to see something pure, and good, and holy.

The same question could be asked of Christians on Palm Sunday? Why do you come to this service when you could wait for Easter that is just around the corner. This is not the Sunday when Jesus finishes first and lifts the trophy victorious. This is the Sunday when we cheer for him, but we all know that his battle is only about to begin. He will be bloodied and bruised by the end of the week. You could just do like lots of folks and skip to the ending and sing ‘Jesus Christ is Risen Today’.

So why do you come? Maybe you are here because you want to remember the whole journey and the real struggle of Christ. Maybe you want to offer your small palm branch of encouragement to Jesus as he runs his race. Maybe you have come because you know that you don’t have to be particularly good at following Jesus to know you have been called to do something particularly good with your life. Maybe you are here because you want to remember that there is no place you can flee from God’s Spirit, no place in heaven or on earth, that you can hide from God’s love?

Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem not because he knew was going to cross the finish line in first place, but rather he entered because was carrying God’s love within him. And this love enabled him to look around at the people in the crowds, the people in the high courts, the people on the hillside and he could see beauty and worth and God’s image reflected in them. These people were

worth it. His deep humility meant he saw people he wanted to save. God sent Jesus to earth, so we had someone to follow, and someone to give us hope.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in his book *Walden*, “Humility, like the darkness, reveals the heavenly lights.” Why did the people line the streets to shout Hosanna? Because we long for glimmers of heavenly lights amidst the darkness of our lives. Because we need to be reminded of the truths Christ lived for and died for and rose for that:

- 1) We are made in God’s image.
- 2) We are people worth redeeming.
- 3) We are called to lives of faith.

Palm Sunday is the annual pilgrimage for those seeking answers, seeking hope, seeking salvation. That’s why we come.

Once upon a time, a man named Jesus came to earth and ushered in new life. Following him, with your heart, and your mind, and your soul, and your strength is a particularly good thing to do. Hosanna, save us!

Amen.