

Kirby Lawrence Hill Abington Presbyterian Church
April 5, 2020 Palm Sunday
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21:1-11

BOTH/AND

The organ prelude that was being played in an empty sanctuary sounded like a joyous march. It had been just days before Holy Week when the Atlanta suburban congregation I served years ago was anxiously waiting to see whether we would receive the certificate of occupation in time to worship together for the first time in the brand new sanctuary on Palm Sunday. We finally got the green light. So, it was decided that for the initial worship service in that facility, that no one would be allowed to go into the sanctuary until it was time for us all to process in together during the opening hymn. All of us listened to the prelude from just outside the sanctuary doors. The call to worship then followed. And then we heard the thunderous organ introduction of the hymn, “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” Everyone in the congregation had a palm branch to wave on high as we sang our Hosannas as we processed into our congregation’s new place of worship. It was an exciting and joyous day for the pastor and congregation alike. That there was an empty sanctuary right before the Palm Sunday service years ago felt very different to me than does the almost empty sanctuary for this year’s Palm Sunday.

I’ve always welcomed the joy of Palm Sunday celebrations. As we processed into that new sanctuary years ago, part of the joy was in the sense that our Lord had accompanied our congregation on a long journey that included a lot of difficult decisions and a lot of fundraising and then worshiping in a school for about nine months until the last part of the construction was completed. We as a congregation were thankful to have reached a significant goal, and it was exciting to anticipate what next our Lord would do in our midst.

That Palm Sunday stands out for me as the most unusual I had ever experienced until this year. However, on this Palm Sunday, I dare say that we have more in common with the original Palm Sunday crowd than I have ever known it to be before in my lifetime. Those first Palm Sunday-ers were marching toward their central place of worship, the temple in Jerusalem, at a time of turmoil when they so

yearned for God's deliverance from oppressive forces. I feel a deep need for God's deliverance at this turbulent time – not from an occupying Roman army, but from an invading virus that also threatens our lives, that alters how we can experience community, that doesn't care how it impacts us.

On that initial Palm Sunday, the reason the crowds were journeying together toward the temple was for the Passover observance. This was the grand Jewish festival when they remembered and celebrated God's powerful liberation of the Hebrew people from their plight as slaves in Egypt. Some of the crowds that were entering Jerusalem had been walking together for days. As they went, the 118th was among the psalms they would sing as they journeyed together. From its lines, they sang, "O give thanks to the Lord, whose steadfast love endures forever." They chanted, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you!" In Hebrew, that phrase, 'save us,' was 'hoshiana,' akin to the word 'hosanna' as an expression of praise. They continued singing from the psalm, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." Even as they cut down palm branches along the way, they called out the words from the psalm: "bind the festal procession with branches up to the horns of the altar."

Those people had seen plenty of Roman military parades where the ruler entered the city riding a war stallion surrounded by soldiers armed with instruments of death. But now the people coming toward the temple were part of a counterdemonstration marching with someone named Jesus who came riding on – wait, what was he riding? Earlier, Jesus had sent two of his disciples into a village to secure that on which he would ride into the city. He had told them what they would find and what to say if the owner stopped them from carrying out his instructions.

Actually, Matthew's narrative is the only Palm Sunday account where Jesus is described as riding two animals as he enters the city – both a donkey and a colt. It is strange to imagine. Did the gospel writer misunderstand the Hebrew poetic parallelism found in the Old Testament book of Zechariah that seemed to depict such an entrance describing one animal with both of the words 'donkey' and 'colt'? Or did Matthew include both animals as a symbol to show that Jesus was coming into the holy city as a peaceful king who rides in on a donkey instead of a stallion, and also includes him riding on the young untrained colt as a show of humility?

Those who were coming into the city at the same time as Jesus saw things differently from those who were residents of Jerusalem. Those who were making a pilgrimage to observe Passover were excited that Jesus was accompanying them. But the residents in town were shaken by the commotion of such an entrance and were asking who this was. Could the cloaks and branches being laid before this person be a sign of a royal entrance? Most of the people understood Caesar to be emperor, Herod to be king, and Pilate to be governor – that was the power structure that demanded allegiance from all of the people. Those coming into the city who turned the event into Palm Sunday recognized those figures and their positions of power, but they wanted to be influenced more by this humble majestic figure riding into the city. Could he perhaps be that great source of hope, the long-promised coming king, someone to be called ‘Lord,’ or ‘Messiah?’ Some of them had seen Jesus open the eyes of the blind. He had enabled the lame to walk. He had fed the hungry when there seemed to be few resources to be found. These stories were exhilarating, a sign that God cared about the long-ignored people’s agenda. God seemed to be addressing both their physical and spiritual health needs. How about their societal health? Jesus showed that God’s deliverance was coming, but it would come in a different form than anyone expected as Jesus placed himself on the line utterly devoted to God’s agenda.

Perhaps, in addition to the question of whether Jesus was riding one animal or two, this is where how we see this story becomes a both/and instead of an either/or for us. Palm Sunday is not just an example of what God’s entrance into the power centers of our lives looks like as we must decide where our allegiance lies. It is also a demonstration by Jesus of what our lives are supposed to look like. We see in this person the ultimate example of the fully human life, one who is on a pilgrimage. Even as those who are sheltering in place, pilgrims are people on a holy journey who are unencumbered by lesser loyalties and ties. As they travel day by day, the concept of what is most important changes. So they travel light, as we see with Jesus, who even had to borrow his own ride into the city. They travel without the ties to lesser loyalties, which frees them to truly come in the name of the Lord. Jesus is a demonstration of what our true humanity can look like. It is not an accommodation to the current powers, nor is it an agenda of accommodation of power for us. Rather, Jesus comes seeking and following God’s agenda, that

addresses those with needs along the way, but that also challenges the power priorities of the status quo.

At a point in this pandemic, on Palm Sunday, our sanctuary building is empty. However, each one of us is a potential sanctuary if we give our highest allegiance unto God and follow Christ's example. At this point in our pilgrimage, those same words from the 118th Psalm that were chanted on that first Palm Sunday could also ring in each one of us. Will each of us as an individual sanctuary be empty, or will we each be filled with those same phrases as we proclaim: "O give thanks to the Lord, whose steadfast love endures forever." With we say from the psalm: "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," as well as, "Save us, we beseech you, Lord!" Friends, there is still reason to proclaim as did the psalm and the Palm Sunday crowd: "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." For when everything seems to be in turmoil, our Lord comes both to deliver us and to show us how to live for God's purposes. Let us as individual sanctuaries be filled with expressions of praise, gratitude, intercessions, and commitments to God's priorities. This can be our most memorable Palm Sunday as we each welcome the coming of the Lord into our midst recognizing there is indeed reason to shout, "Hosanna!"