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Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

March 28, 2021

SHOUTING IN THE STREETS

The plan for today had been for there to be outdoor Sunday school for our congregation's children this morning where they would learn about what happened on Palm Sunday and then they would experience and pass on some of the joy of the day by providing sort of a palm parade for us as we left the worship service. The song that popped into my mind about these plans was from the musical *Funny Girl* from years ago. Can you hear Barbra Streisand singing, "Don't Rain on My Parade." ¹

However, what happened on that first Palm Sunday was actually not quite a parade. In some ways it was more like a procession. The people walking on the road into Jerusalem were not just putting on a show for others who were watching. They were instead coming in pilgrimage into the holy city for the Passover observance. This annual religious observance was the biggest gathering of the year in Jerusalem as that special time to celebrate God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Some clearly dreamed of being delivered from another oppressor, this time, the occupying power of the Romans. Many of the people had walked for days to get there. Yes, it was festive. Those making pilgrimage would typically chant some of the psalms, including the 118th that we just heard as they drew close to their destination. There would have been a fair amount of joy as they came over the Mount of Olives and could see the temple before them.

In other ways, however, this particular procession became more like an inaugural parade, where new leadership would be moving with and among the people over which he would rule. There had been enthronement celebrations that were described in the Hebrew scriptures where people were welcoming a new monarch. In such circumstances, the crowd had laid down their cloaks to make something like a red carpet over which the newly-crowned royalty would travel. There were certain times when branches of trees were cut and waved to celebrate a leader who

had triumphed in battle. We see the similarities in the description of Palm Sunday. In the gospel account, we notice there is great attention given to the animal upon which Jesus would be riding. A donkey would actually be a fitting animal upon which would be riding a king who came in peace. Otherwise, it might be a war stallion that would be carrying the person receiving the acclamation. We see which one of those Jesus chose.

Referring to the one riding the donkey, there is shouting in the streets: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” They are quoting the 118th psalm. Then they go on to shout: “Blessed is the coming reign of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” “Hosanna” is a contraction of two Hebrew terms: yaw-shah, meaning to save or deliver, and naw, meaning to beseech or pray – yaw-shah-nah. When directed to one who is able to save or deliver, it is an expression of praise. They believe the Messiah, the one who would deliver them, is in their midst. And they anticipate they will have even greater reason to wave their palm branches when that Messiah will have run the oppressive occupying armies of the Romans out of all of Palestine.

There have been a lot of sermons preached about how the crowds who were shouting ‘Hosanna,’ on Palm Sunday were the same ones shouting ‘Crucify him,’ on Good Friday. I don’t find anything in the gospel accounts that indicates that it is the same people shouting on both days. But what is clear is that those who had been shouting their prayers for deliverance and expressions of praise toward Jesus are no longer doing so by the end of the week. They had one kind of deliverance in mind, and when Jesus offered a different kind of deliverance and reign, their praises went silent.

During the tumult of this past year, many of us have lifted up hosanna-like prayers seeking deliverance. When God’s deliverance may have come in a different way than we had hoped, or may have come more slowly than we had wished, the question comes as to whether our praises then go silent. Perhaps we need to be less focused on the rain on our parade in order to relish the One who reigns (r-e-i-g-n-s) over our procession.

In thinking about Jesus as a royal figure, we might note that his reign is quite different from that of other rulers. When has there been a monarch whose resources were as meager as were those of Jesus? He traveled around with no place of his own to stay the night. We just heard that he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He would eat his final meal in a borrowed room. When he was condemned to die on a cross, he would be wearing a cloak and sandals as his only material possessions, and the Roman soldiers would cast dice to see who got to take those. He would wear no crown but one made of thorns, placed on his head in ridicule. After he died, someone would place his body in a borrowed tomb.

Yet, what Jesus did possess indicates that his reign is one that offers the deepest levels of deliverance. Jesus possessed a deep sensitivity to those who had the greatest needs. He paid attention to the hurts of the poor and rich alike, addressing that which could twist a person out of shape, showing how forgiveness could overcome shame and bitterness, ever looking for opportunities to heal the minds, bodies, and spirits of all of the people.

He possessed hope, confidence and trust in God's will for him and for all. Even when his own story would not turn out how he had hoped, when his prayer of 'hosanna' or 'deliver me, O Lord,' was lifted up on the night he would be betrayed and arrested and sentenced to death, he still expressed his 'hosanna' of praise unto God when his deliverance took a different form than he had prayed for. And the place of his greatest victory would not be on a battlefield, but in an empty tomb.

His greatest possession that he shared so freely was a love for every single person, even those who wouldn't return his love, even those who wanted to kill him. This love is one that does not scapegoat people by race or religion or ethnic heritage or class. It is a love demonstrated in humble commitment, through giving all of oneself for the well-being of all. In the words of the early church, Jesus emptied himself.

These are the kind of possessions that define the reign of Jesus. One thing more he would seek – the hearts of those who want to journey with him. He still seeks hearts so that people can be freed from that which oppresses. The early church father, Augustine, wrote in a prayer to God, "You have made us for yourself, and

our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.”² It is a ‘hosanna,’ deliver us kind of prayer. We have an opportunity today, not so much to participate in a parade, but to be part of an inaugural processional, where the reign of our Lord Jesus is welcomed to process into our very hearts. Our hearts are to be the place from which Jesus rules, but it requires a choosing of submission over spectacle. As we welcome and receive the One who reigns over heaven and earth, the One who humbly frees us, we can then proclaim, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord and blessed are we who get to share the very blessings of God. Hosanna! Hosanna not just in the sanctuary or just in the streets – Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹ Written by Bob Merrill and Julie Styne, 1964, performed in Funny Girl.

² The Confessions of St. Augustine, translated by John Ryan, Image Books, New York, 1960.