

From 'Hosanna' to 'Crucify' - Who Is This Jesus?

Palm/Passion Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11 Zechariah 9:9-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Palm Sunday, as many of you are aware, is now also known as Passion Sunday. I don't remember hearing that name in the churches I attended when I was growing up. Passion Sunday refers to when this particular Sunday deals not only with the joy and excitement of Jesus triumphantly entering the city of Jerusalem, but also with a nod to the impending events throughout this last week of Jesus' life, ending with his Roman execution on a cross.

It has been my custom over the years, therefore, to include in this service of worship elements of both Palm and Passion Sunday. Take note, for instance, that the liturgy in today's service begins with the joy of the opening hymn, "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," but will conclude with "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." **Emphasizing the themes of Passion Sunday helps us to remember that between these two joyous Sundays of Palms and Easter, there is a cross and a brutal death.** So on this day we are asked to make the **difficult emotional shift from celebration and praise to loss and grief; from strength to vulnerability. These transitions are not uncommon in our own lives.**

Since we will be offering both a Maundy Thursday Service and a Good Friday Service here at the church, which I hope you will attend in order to experience a fuller impact of Holy Week that leads to Easter Sunday, I want to focus the rest of this sermon on some of nuances and implications of this story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and hopefully make some connections with our own journey of faith in this day and time.

In past years I have emphasized the fickleness of the crowd, that at one moment exuberantly shouts "Hosanna," and within a week cries out "Crucify him!" I've gone on to share how we sometimes have the same tendency. It's the old trick of putting someone up on a pedestal and then knocking them off. And while this story appears in all four Gospel accounts, there are some significant and intentional differences that are usually overlooked. This proves yet again, at least to me, that these **biblical authors were more concerned with presenting a particular theological perspective than they were at recording an actual historical event in a literal way.**

In examining the text from Matthew carefully, we find a dramatic difference in understanding the story than we are used to hearing. That involves, in Matthew's theological worldview, what kind of Messiah was expected. Much has been speculated about people expecting a **political warrior Messiah** who would come in a blaze of glory and throw Caesar's occupying forces out of Judea, and Herod Antipas,

Rome's puppet leader, out of Galilee. Since Jesus didn't turn out to be that kind of messiah, that is what turns the crowd against him later in the week. Or so we've been told, including by me in previous sermons on this story.

As it turns out, that interpretation does not do justice to Matthew's account. For unlike the other three Gospels, **Matthew has added a quotation from Zechariah 9:9 to set up the specific prophecy that he believes Jesus fulfilled.** Here's the full text, directly from the Old Testament book of Zechariah:

⁹ *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*
¹⁰ *He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations.*

Why is that reference so important and why does it make such a difference? **This is hardly the description of a coming warrior king.** Rather, it is a description of the kind of king, a Divine King, who will "cut off" chariots, war-horses, and battle bows and commands only peace. **Those who have journeyed with Jesus throughout his ministry know that he is no warrior, that he is instead a teacher and a healer. Matthew hints, therefore, that the crowd that shouts "Hosanna" at Jesus' entry into the city is not the same crowd of folks who yell "Crucify him" by the end of the week. So perhaps, according to Matthew, it is not Jesus' disciples and followers who are so fickle, but rather those that don't know him. It is the uninformed, then, who have the wrong expectations of what a Messiah should be and do.**

Perhaps Matthew's entire point is found in verses 10-11. "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." As readers of this story we are cast into the role of asking for ourselves: **Who is this Jesus? How would YOU answer that question?** Perhaps there are as many different answers as there are people in this sanctuary today. It is an all-important question. Matthew certainly has his opinion. **Jesus is a prophet, and one like the triumphant yet humble and gentle king who comes to bring peace and reconciliation,** not war and oppression.

As Christians (and I admit there are some folks who are having a difficult time with that label, especially within our progressive Christian movement where we don't want to be confused with the fundamentalist side of the theological spectrum), **we claim that our best understanding of the nature and character of God comes in observing the ways and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Notice that this is not an exclusionary perspective. For progressive Christians, we can claim the ways of Jesus as the definitive revelation of God, but not necessarily the only revelation, as do those Christians who insist that Jesus is the ONLY way to know God.**

Jesus' ways of nonviolence, justice, peace and reconciliation, therefore, inform us that these are the same traits of the One we call God. We also learn, unfortunately,

that this particular way of being comes with a price, especially at the hand of those in power who uphold the status quo – then and now.

The one who enters humbly on a donkey willingly and nonviolently accepts the judgment and violence of those who demand to be served not according to God's purposes, but their own. **Gentleness, humility, peaceableness, mercy, and self-giving acts of generosity and compassion are the marks of God's kingdom, over-and-against the kings and kingdoms of this world. And yes, both in biblical times and today, this is a profoundly political statement.**

I sometimes wonder if a large portion of Christianity today still has misinformed notions and expectations of the kind of king Jesus revealed to be at the heart of the nature and character of God. Rather than experiencing the Divine Presence as gentle and peace-loving, **way too many Christians, in my opinion, talk about God and Jesus more as a victorious warrior who comes to kick butt and take names.** Yeah, I said it.

With a warrior comes the notion of winners and losers. This understanding of God can and has had dangerous consequences. While the Crusades come to mind, so does the nationalistic attitude that God is only on *our* side, and will lead us to victory (whatever that means) if we only believe strongly enough in what we're told to believe. **I question the reality of that kind of interventionist warrior God.**

Instead, I suggest that God is experienced, in part, in and through the strengths, gifts, and actions of those who understand and respond to the God as revealed to us by Jesus. Biblical commentator Stephen Boyd summarizes it this way:

Jesus makes clear that his loving Parent repudiates the exploitation of the people by those who would be king, but he does so without violence – without a club, chariots, horsemen, and swords. **Jesus accepts the consequences of standing resolutely for God's order and justice.** For those who would be great, this is the way – the way of service to God's order.

In other words, we are called to serve the ways of God, not the other way around, when we would have God serve our ways. And since God's way has a tendency to be a threat to the power elite – in both church and society – we too may find out what it means to “take up the cross and follow Jesus.”

So who is this Jesus? Think about how you would answer this question as we go through Holy Week. For me, echoing Matthew, he is a prophet, embodying peace and reconciliation.

I encourage you, as individuals and us together as a congregation, to **think about how you will embody peace and reconciliation.** And let us not forget that like that palm procession of old, **it's not about us as much as it is about the One we have come to know, this prophet, Jesus of Nazareth.**

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word