

Wandering Heart: Songs of loudest praise

Palm/Passion Sunday

John 12:12-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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All four gospels include the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On this day, we will hear the account in the Gospel of John. There are a few things to notice. It is the shortest version, leaving out such things as Jesus' instructions for his disciples to get a colt and bring it to him. Instead, Jesus finds his own young donkey, thus fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy. And, interestingly, this is the only gospel that identifies that the leafy branches being waved by the crowd were palm branches. But Palm Sunday sounds a lot better than Leafy Branches Sunday. Of course, none of those discrepancies in details are of ultimate concern. (Read John 12:12-16.)

If you've been with us for all or part of the season of Lent this year, you're familiar with our resource material's focus on the disciple Peter, and how we can relate to stories of his sometimes up and down, understanding and misunderstanding, wandering faith. As you have just heard, however, Peter isn't specifically named in this story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. That leaves us wondering where Peter might be and how he is participating. Was he joining in with the crowd singing loud praises, or perhaps was he just watching from the sidelines?

Looking at this story metaphorically instead of just historically, we are asked to consider where we would be in the crowd on that day. Again, joining in as part of the expectant crowd, or standing back carefully watching? Perhaps we get a hint in the scripture passage itself when it proclaims, "**Jesus' disciples did not understand these things at first**" (v. 16a). That may be one of the most important points that the gospel writer was trying to make. Misunderstanding is a common theme in John. And I think **we all can relate to being confused and not fully comprehending what Jesus was, and is, all about.**

Another important point that follows, it is only after Jesus was glorified, meaning his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, that the disciples, "...**then they remembered**" (v. 16b). As the saying goes, "hindsight is twenty-twenty." True, **it is often only in retrospect, when looking and reflecting back on events in our life of faith, that we gain a clearer understanding.** Sometimes it is only then that we recognize we were in the Sacred Presence of God all along. Know, then, **we're in good company when we misunderstand or are confused about the stories we read in scripture.**

Shifting focus now from the disciples, what can we glean from this story from the perspective of the crowd? **What did it mean to shout "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!"? Those words have everything to do**

with their hopes and expectations of who this Jesus is and what they expect him to accomplish. In quoting Old Testament references (the Hebrew Scriptures), it was clear the crowd was expecting the long-awaited and prophesied Messiah, or in Greek, "Christ". However, the Greek word "**hosanna**", translated from the Hebrew, **did not mean "hooray"**, as commonly used in Christianity for jubilation and a form of praise. **No, hosanna literally meant "save us". It was an appeal for deliverance, a cry for divine help and rescue.**

Their expectation was that the Messiah would save them from their Roman occupiers, most likely in a militaristic way, thus setting up a new Jewish kingdom like that of King David a thousand years earlier. This was about a return to power and self-rule, in what many have described, understandably, as being highly nationalistic. And for those who are oppressed, struggling, ignored, powerless, or marginalized, as most of the Jews at that time were, **any glimpse of gaining back some power or security would be highly welcomed and cheered.**

Jesus, however, turned out not to be a militaristic victor, but a humble subversive. Nationalism, however, can become dangerous. The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, a former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), reflected on the different understandings people had, and still have today, of this Jesus. He writes:

I hope that many are resisting the wave of Christian nationalism that has been the dominant Christian narrative in our political discourse.

Too many are choosing the narrative of Jesus as a wartime victor and choosing a Gospel militarized against anyone who would stray from a litmus test of beliefs—beliefs that Jesus never actually addressed, and beliefs certainly not included in the commandments that Jesus did speak to us, to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now [a clearer biblical understanding of] Jesus, that one who is turning over tables, challenging power, and sitting with sinners in order to heal and love, that's the one worthy of a parade.

It's like we have **two competing versions of Jesus, then and now.** Thus, two (or more) competing versions of Christianity. Historically, perhaps we always have. **There are those who use Jesus not as a model of humble service, compassion, and love of others, but as a means to gain power and control so that they can lord it over others. This is wrong, biblically wrong, on so many levels.** Perhaps you've seen depictions of Jesus (I have) as some kind of Marvel superhero, muscular and holding an automatic weapon as the American flag waves in the background. Sometimes, the image of Jesus is replaced with another figure that some come close to calling their messiah, seeking rescue from the pluralistic and diverse society we have always had.

Returning to our biblical story, however, in the crowd's defense on that original Palm Sunday, it's not hard to understand their hopes and expectations of being saved and rescued from the oppression and controlling power they were under. It's a profound reminder that our ways and notions of a messiah are often not God's ways, ways of challenging the status quo and the powers that be, and in a non-violent way. And in our day and age, **non-violence refers to verbally as well as physically. Beware, then, of those who use language of violence,** for words have power, and can indeed

lead others to actions of violence. We have indeed witnessed such violence, and many fear we will again.

Let us also beware of how we respond when our own expectations aren't met, including those of God, so that our hosannas don't transition into crucify. Let us constantly evaluate our expectations, remembering that some may even be unconscious, that we aren't fully aware of what we expect of others and ourselves, yet still being guided by them to judge others and ourselves. For **how we deal with our expectations, again including those of ourselves, will determine to a large degree our ability to cope with life;** be it in our jobs, our community of faith, and certainly in our families and in other relationships. **And when those expectations are not met, grace and forgiveness may be what is needed most.**

Jesus made it necessary for people to re-think and redefine their understandings and expectations of a Savior and Messiah. That is still needed today, no matter where people find themselves on the theological, and yes political, spectrum. And in a spirit of humility, like Jesus' disciples on that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, **let's admit that we do not understand all these things. And like the crowd, sometimes our songs of loudest praise may also be an appeal for deliverance, a cry for divine help and rescue.**

Remember, the story continues throughout this Holy Week, including services here on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, before we can shout "Alleluia!" next Sunday on Easter.

Amen.