

## Resistance to Apathy

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday

April 9, 2017

<sup>1</sup>When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> '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.'

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>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!'

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

Today's text is one of the stories in the Bible that lends itself to visual interpretation, capturing our imaginations. So much so, that in many churches, even in our own this morning, followers of Jesus feel compelled to act out what we imagine Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem would have been like. As I read the scripture, you saw on the screen,

one film maker's rendering of what the scene might have been like that day...Jesus on a humble donkey, the palms, the cloaks, children, the crowd shouting...

In the Gospel of Matthew, "the crowd" is used as a single character in the story. The author talks about "the crowds" as if everyone present was thinking and feeling and perceiving the same things. Based on my experiences with crowds, I find that unlikely. And certainly, if we did a comparison of how this event is portrayed in each of the four gospels, we would see some differences in perspective even amongst these writers and their respective writings.

One thing important to the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is that the readers understand Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish messianic prophecy. Matthew uses this story, in some ways, to pull that all together by referencing scripture and using the words of the crowd as a confession of who Jesus was. In the story, the disciples fetch a donkey *and* a colt, and Jesus rides on both of them to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which is then quoted in verse 5. The words the author of Matthew puts in the mouths of the crowd are not just rally cries at protest or demonstration, but confessions, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The people in Jerusalem, for whom this Jesus was unknown, asked "the crowds," "Who is this?" They were told, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." The confession continues. This answer recalls Moses' words in Deuteronomy 18, verse 15, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me, from among your own people, you shall heed such a prophet." In other words, Matthew was saying to his readers, look no further people, the Messiah is here. But is this the Messiah "the crowd" was expecting?

"The crowd" was shouting, "Hosanna," **Save us**. With their cloaks and their tree branches, they created a royal carpet for the one they had

followed from place to place. The one who taught with authority, who healed the sick, and cast out demons from the tormented, and who, twice, had even satisfied their physical hunger with food meant to feed only a few. These were the things they had seen which led them to believe he was “the one.” He was the one who would save them. But, from what did they need to be saved?

If there had been a cable news reporter imbedded in the crowd, interviewing some of them, what would they have said when asked, “From what do you need to be saved?”

Would they have said,

Poverty?

Debt?

Isolation?

Sickness?

Violence?

Exclusion?

Oppression?

Each of them had their own reasons for being there that day. The people who surrounded Jesus were the misfits, the ones who had been rejected, mistreated, and taken advantage of. They were the ones for whom the current system wasn't working. This was by no means a homogenous group, someone looking on may have described the crowd as a motley crew. But here they were together. This story of the entry into Jerusalem illustrates the thing that Jesus did best; the thing that any good leader does best. He brought the crowd together. They had different reasons for being there, but together, around the ways of Jesus, they found their common voice. In addition, the story of this day demonstrates for us the world's need for people of action, for people who are not willing to passively let systems that are not working for everyone continue.

And history is full of stories of regular people who have, like the crowd around Jesus, recognized that something must be done and that we are able to accomplish far more together than we can alone. But these stories are messy. They include people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others in Germany who were part of the Confessing Church movement in the 1930's. They gathered in opposition to Hitler's efforts to unify the protestant churches in Germany into one pro-Nazi Protestant Reich Church. Bonhoeffer is the one who said, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." Bonhoeffer himself was imprisoned in a concentration camp, tried and hanged, accused of plotting to assassinate Hitler. The man trying to save the Jews, succumbed to violence, and couldn't save himself.

A story perhaps more well known to us is the story of 250,000 men, women, and children from diverse racial, ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds who gathered in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963 around one message; justice and dignity for everyone. On that day, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream Speech." In that speech, he said:

"I have a dream today...I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the south with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated April 4, 1968. Resistance isn't easy, it's messy, and it's costly.

These stories remind us that, for followers of Jesus, apathy is not an option. And our work together hinges on the hope we have in the possibility that the world can be like Jesus imagined, and I believe, like

God intended it to be. Throughout Lent, we have looked at the biblical theme of Sabbath and what the world and our lives could be like if we embraced the ways of Sabbath. We have spent some time thinking about the possibility that the restLESSness of 21<sup>st</sup> century Bartlesville, OK has more in common with the restLESS world of Pharaoh in Egypt than we may have thought. And today, it is clear to me that what the crowd in Jerusalem that day desperately wanted to be saved from, were the very things we have been lifting up in our restless world today. So, more than 2000 years later, we still cry out Hosanna! Save us!

Save us from the disparity of wealth that is killing our brothers and sisters, and making us hate one another. Save us from never feeling like we are enough no matter how hard we work or how much we produce. Save us from our propensity for violence and from teaching our children that whoever is stronger or has the most lethal weapons wins. My God, save us from ourselves! Cause us to march with Jesus to proclaim peace and reconciliation, compassion and love of neighbor. Unite us, men, women, children, neighbors, friends, democrats, republicans, progressives, conservatives...unite us in resistance to restLESSness in favor of the rest and the hope we find in the teaching, healing, loving, just, compassionate crowd of Jesus followers.

Our story today is a story of desperate people who found hope in a prophet from Nazareth, and it's a story of powerful people who found themselves afraid of that prophet, and that crowd. At the end of the story, we are told, "the whole city was in turmoil." The root of the word turmoil means "tremble" and is the same word used to describe what happened when the earth shook as Jesus took his last breath and when the angels appeared at the empty tomb. The author's point is "...when the Messiah comes, it is an earthshaking event."<sup>1</sup> We know the story of

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<sup>1</sup> Day, Audrey, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year A, Volume 2*, Edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2000, 157.

how all of this will end for the desperate people, for the powerful people, and for Jesus.

We are still writing our part of the story, though. So, for now, let's hold onto the hope...let's hold onto the "Hosannas" that were and are the voices of hope.

Let me end this morning with this reflection titled, *Hold on to the Hosannas*, written by Rev. E. Crumlish.

Let us stay with the Hosannas for a while  
Let us let them keep on ringing in our ears  
Hosanna!

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord  
Instead of rushing on to hear the cries  
that came later in the week

Let us stay with the Hosannas  
Maybe once we have heard those  
in a new way

we will be ready  
to make the rest of the journey  
A journey that was hastened

and given new purpose  
by those Hosannas

For those Hosannas were not  
simply the innocent cries  
of palm branch waving children

Those Hosannas were the war cries of adults  
tired of the oppression  
of occupying forces

Those hosannas  
were the hopeful cries  
of a nation seeking liberation.

Those Hosannas  
were an investment of hope  
in one they thought would deliver.  
Those Hosannas  
that we have sanitized over the years  
rang out in clear insurrection  
sealing the fate  
of one who rode on a donkey.  
so, let us stay with the Hosannas  
Let us wrest them from the lips of children  
and allow them to ring in our ears  
and spew from our mouths  
as a call to action  
a call to justice  
a call to love.  
Let us stay with the Hosannas  
even as we journey  
with the Christ  
who carried those Hosannas  
all the way to the cross  
and ensured their fulfillment  
as the justice and love of God.  
Let us stay with the Hosannas.  
Amen.