

“Look, The World Has Gone After Him!”

John 12:12-19

April 10, 2022

Palm Sunday

Read John 12:9-19

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

Oh, what a celebration it must have been. Oh, how exciting to be in the crowd, rejoicing, shouting, cheering. Wonder of wonders, the king has come to save us! Hosanna! Save us!

We should set the scene: how and why was a crowd there at all? Jews had come from all over the country to arrive in Jerusalem for Passover. This is one of the three major annual festivals in Jerusalem. It would last a week and – to us – the road would look like a time-lapse movie of Los Angeles or San Francisco rush hour. A trickle would become crowded, and then bottlenecked, and then long lines waiting and pulsing. There was great anticipation and excitement.

Passover was different than the other festivals. The other two major festivals were based upon celebrations of agricultural themes: first fruits and harvest. Passover celebrated God’s deliverance from the oppression of Egypt – how God showed that he was more powerful than Pharaoh, more powerful than the gods of the most powerful nation on earth.

This year, there was an edge on the singing. The pilgrims were Jewish, living under Roman occupation. Thus, these songs were also a statement of defiance. They shared the hope and confidence that Yahweh would be victorious. They were prayers reminding God of his promises.

Beyond the edge to their singing, there was tension fueled by reports of this miracle man – Jesus. For a while now, Jesus had been out in the country and the reports have come in that he had been doing signs of power – signs that God was coming to deliver the people like he did with Moses. God’s anointed one was coming to Jerusalem!

As they were standing in lines, they repeated the rituals from as long back as they could remember. They sang songs – songs we have now as Psalms 113-118, the hallelujah psalms. They all knew these songs, kind of like how our children know Christmas carols. Someone sang the first line, then they all joined in. A call and response took place. When each of the themes played, when each one of the psalms was sung, people would tear up from deep inside. These songs went to the core of who these people were. These Psalms reminded the people of the sovereignty of Yahweh. They were songs to God’s goodness; they were songs remembering how God delivered them from their enemies.

As John described, the crowds went out from Jerusalem to Bethany to see what Jesus had done in raising Lazarus from the dead. The symbolism of their journey from Jerusalem was not lost on the religious leaders. The people were leaving the establishment to go to Jesus. The religious authorities had to put a stop to him. Things had gotten out of control. The Pharisees had to regain control. They were going to put an end to the movement by killing Jesus *and* Lazarus – take away all the physical evidence of what God was doing. When their plans were frustrated, you read their great fear expressed at the end of the narrative, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

The symbolism of the palms – why there were palms being waved and why they were a big deal – the palms were symbols of Jewish nationalism from the Maccabean revolt from 150 years before. Palms were the sign of the revolution. To put it into perspective: to the Romans, the Palm Sunday scene could have looked like all the Trump flags swarming the capitol on January 6. The nation's liberator was at hand, the King of Israel had come! God has saved us! "Save us," is the meaning of the word "Hosanna!"

And save, Jesus would. But not in the way they were cheering.

We do Palm Sunday each year. It is fun to wave palms. There is a child-like innocence to the celebration of Jesus. Given the way it is described in the gospels, Jesus enjoyed it, too. He did not rebuke the crowd or the cheers or the waving of the palms. He received all of it. In Luke's recounting of this event, the religious leaders urged Jesus to stop the revelers; to which he responded, "I tell you, even if these were silent, the stones would shout out." (Luke 19:40) Celebrating God's goodness, God's saving character, God's sovereignty was good.

There's a lesson to be had in Palm Sunday: **Praise God.** Even if you might get it wrong, God will get it right.

If you have worshiped with us for any length of time, you may have noticed that I pick on Dan Skinkis every now and then. Dan's heart for praising God is overflowing. It takes years off him. Having Dan be Elder of the Day or preacher or sharing a mission message always reminds me of the line Dan Patrick used to say on ESPN, "You can't stop him; you can only hope to contain him." When Dan Skinkis was Elder of the Day last time, he sincerely promised the sound team that he would remain at the pulpit so the microphone would pick him up for the people on livestream. When I introduced him to come forward, I oh-so-gently-reminded him, "Now, I welcome to the pulpit, and only the pulpit, to remain at the pulpit, our Elder of the Day, Dan Skinkis." Well, it lasted less than a sentence. He got as far as "God is good all the time..." and then he bounced away to the side to collect the response, "all the time, God is good!" On the video posted on our YouTube channel, you can hear my stage whisper – clearly – "Psssst! Dan, Dan! Back to the pulpit! The people at home can't hear you!"

Dan's joy in the Lord exudes from the core of his being and he just can't help but share. Even if you cannot always hear the words that Dan is saying, you know – you *know* – he is sharing his heart of wonder at God's love saving him. He is like the embodiment of Psalm 100:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his, we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and bless his name. For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Many people are afraid that they will look foolish if they really worship God. But, foolish to whom? They are afraid they will look foolish to the people around them, to their friends or family, or to people they want to impress. Further, they do not want to get too emotionally involved. Historically, Presbyterians have been nicknamed "The Frozen Chosen." Why? What is so different about God that it causes this hesitation to be emotionally committed? The same people who do not want to get too emotional for God are perfectly willing to wear the logos of their favorite sports teams. They spend money for tickets, for parking, for overpriced stadium food, to go and shout and cheer as loud as their voices will allow. They are happy and rejoice

when the team wins. High fives, hugs, and dancing. They do not worry whether they are cheering in the right way. They do not worry about whether they are looking foolish.

In church, however, instead of being fans, we have become critics. We give worship thumbs up or thumbs down. The music was too loud, it was not loud enough. There was too much emotion, there was not enough. The sermon was awesome. (Not going to give you an alternative on that one.)

There's a famous story told of Francis Chan; a woman met him at the door after the service and told him that she had not liked the music that Sunday. He replied, "That's OK. We weren't worshipping you." When we approach worship as if it was designed to please us, we wonder why we go away with an empty feeling. Somehow, we have not made the connection with God we were hoping to make.

Matt Redman wrote a song in the early 2000's reflecting on the drifting of worship into performance and consumption:

When the music fades
All is stripped away
And I simply come
Longing just to bring
Something that's of worth
That will bless your heart

I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about you
It's all about you, Jesus
I'm sorry, Lord,
for the thing I've made it
When it's all about you
It's all about you, Jesus

I'll bring you more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what you have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart

Look, worship can be sloppy and messy. The tax collector who beats his chest and says, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner," would stand out in worship this morning. But he connected. Laying down our deepest fears, our deepest failures, our deepest hurts at the foot of the cross are acts of worship. We cheat ourselves – it is not God who is cheating us – we cheat ourselves when we keep reserved.

Now, please hear me correctly. I am not saying that we *should* be different than who God has called us to be. There is an order and decency appropriate in worship. Emotion is not everything. However, emotion is not nothing. We need to understand that order and decency are designed to *encourage* us to praise God, not to protect us *from* praising God. We need to recognize the freedom to engage God in ways that are real and cut through our destructive self-defenses.

Praise God. Even if you might get it wrong, God will get it right.

Palm Sunday helps us realize that "doing it right" is not as important as "doing it." The shouting for the king, the expectation of deliverance, the palms as a sign of the revolution – all these were the right pieces, but for the wrong conclusion. Jesus did one simple thing to put it all right: he found a donkey and rode in on it.

The donkey was a symbol of peace. A donkey was deliberately *not* a political revolutionary. A donkey represented humility. Jesus did not scold the people for the palms; no, he simply took their worship and made it right. Because, ultimately, it was not about how they performed their worship, it was about whom they were worshiping.

Years ago, I played in men's handbell choir at Chula Vista. We were – well, I'll be generous – we were not great. We were not awful, but we were not great. Our director had tremendous patience with us. She used to encourage us by describing "the miracle of the first pew." At the first pew, God would take what we played and make it what He intended – and it would be perfect. Now, perfect did not always mean "sounds perfect;" sometimes it was the visual of faces and the movement and the panic and the effort to get it right so God would be glorified – that would be the witness: that our praise mattered, and God received the best we had to offer. Sometimes, our best was like a toddler's drawing on the refrigerator – not art in a refined sense, but art in an offering given in love by someone special.

So, when you start feeling self-conscious about praising God; if you find yourself holding back because you do not want to be odd or have your neighbors look askance at you – remember whom you are worshiping and let him make it right. It may not make sense at the time; but there are things we do in faith trusting God will make it right. Which brings me to the other point we are going to consider this morning.

Palm Sunday teaches us that we have to live trusting that God knows what he is doing. In the large and the small, in the good and bad events of life, we often will not understand what God is doing until later. John was clear about this: the disciples did not understand what was happening on Palm Sunday until after Jesus' resurrection. Only then did they remember and put things into perspective.

Much of the life of faith is this very struggle. Being faithful often does not make sense as we look forward. We can only make sense of things by looking back. Unfortunately, we do not live backwards. We do not like "not understanding" or not being let in on the bigger picture. It makes us feel out of control. Well, guess what? We are not in control. It probably is worth reminding ourselves of that fact: we are not in control. Our perspective of what is best often is not the same thing as God's. Faith means we have to trust God to be God – and not just when things are going well for us.

It is difficult to trust God in hard times. Yet those are the times when we need to trust God most. When our health fails us, we tend to ask, "Why me?" When our financial fortunes reverse, we ask, "God, what did I do to make you mad? Why can't things get easier?" We want to have more faith, we want to trust God more – we just do not want the opportunities that help us grow in faith and trust. We want to bury our talent in the back yard rather than risk it out in the world.

Nope. It does not work that way. Friends, more often than not, growing in Christ means being stripped of other things that we treasure. It often means doing things that do not make sense if we trust ourselves more than we trust God.

Some of the gravest disappointments in my life have happened when I thought I had God all figured out. Then, when events unfolded differently than I expected, I experienced bitterness and anger. I wondered, "How could God do this to me?"

Only later, in retrospect and seeing other events take place, did I see God's plan and purpose for me. God's leading in my life looks very different than when I direct my life. And, for what it's worth, God's way is better.

This is an old story that you might have heard:

The following letter was found in a baking-powder can wired to the handle of an old pump that offered the only hope of drinking water on a very long and seldom-used trail across the desert in Nevada: "This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete. P.S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold."

Consider faith in the context of Jesus' week. Jesus knew that he was headed towards a deadly confrontation. He was going to endure unimaginable suffering. He would be deserted by his friends and followers. He would be judged and treated as a vile criminal. He trusted God that he would be vindicated and that he would be raised from the dead.

The writer of Hebrews says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." Jesus may have known – conceptually – that he would rise from the dead; but he also knew our doubts and how difficult it was to be faithful, obedient, and in no position to guarantee the ending. He had to trust the Father.

Faith, as again, the writer of Hebrews says, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Only looking back did the disciples realized what happened on Palm Sunday. On this side of the resurrection, it all makes perfect sense. As they were going through it, the disciples must have thought the path to the cross seemed like a real-life slippery slope from glory to disaster. On Good Friday, the triumphal entry must have seemed like a bitter joke. Only later – a history changing, unimaginable event later – could they see the glory of the Lord revealed in Jesus' ride.

A few weeks ago, I invited you to do an exercise "remembering" all the things that you have seen God do in your life. When I did that exercise, I found myself thinking, "Oh, that's why this happened." Or, "I never would have done this if I had not been stopped from doing that." In going back through my life with the lens of seeing what God was doing, I have more confidence God is trustworthy. I am sure that the next step of faith will be scary, but I can make it with more confidence because I know that I am not supposed to be in control; I am called to trust that God is in control.

Conclusion

What are the take-aways from Palm Sunday?

1. Praise God, because God is worthy of our praise. God will make our praise right, even if we are off.
2. Trust God because God is trustworthy. Sometimes we will understand what God is doing only much later.

Join with the crowds because their testimony is true: Hosanna! Save us! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!

Amen.

Questions:

1. Have you ever felt yourself holding back in worship and praise before God? Why? What was at stake?
2. Is God trustworthy? How do you know? When have you trusted and what have you experienced?