

OUR HIGH AND LOWLY CALLING

Sermon, March 28, 2021

Passion/Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. It is so nice seeing all of you here this morning, and having the choir singing again! Last year was the first and only Holy Week in the entire history of our nation that the churches across our land were closed; that extreme national shutdown was (*and still is*) unprecedented in so many ways ... but I am so grateful we are preparing to commemorate this holiest of weeks not just on the internet with four people in the sanctuary. Every year at this time I like to point out what a spectrum of emotions takes place in the course of this week. We will go from "*Hallelujah! Hosannah!*" on Sunday to "*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*" on Friday. We will go from the exuberant "*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,*" to the scoffing and jeering "*He saved others; let Him save Himself!*" We will go from Jesus' triumphal entry, with the waving of palms and the welcoming shouts of the crowd and the delightful cries of children, to hoots of derision and loud demands for Jesus' crucifixion and death. And just about every year I say please don't go from the "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday directly to the "Hallelujahs" of Easter, and completely miss marking and commemorating and contemplating what takes place in between ... the events that are at the CENTER of the Christian gospel, the events of Jesus' passion (*that, by the way, is a plug for you to attend the services of worship this week Thursday and Friday!*).

Why "passion;" why is that word used? We normally associate the word with intense emotion and feeling, an intensity which can be positive or negative. Our English word "passion" comes from a Greek root word which specifically means to suffer, to undergo or experience difficulty. But it is appropriate to use "passion" in the broader English sense as well, because God's passion is on display in the Passion! God's passionate love for His people is at work. Jesus' suffering ... His Passion ... was born of *divine* passion. It was born out of God's *passionate* love for you and for me.

And Holy Week begins with *passionate* crowds. Jesus had just left the village of Bethany and was coming down the Mount of Olives, by the Garden of Gethsemane, on the way to the Eastern Gate (*also known as the Golden Gate*) which was the gate through which the Messiah was expected to enter Jerusalem according to a prophecy in Ezekiel, a distance roughly approximate to the distance between here and the Community College of Rhode Island. This triumphal procession was accompanied by shouting and singing from the crowds of people lining the roadside along the way, people who had been gathering from the outlying villages for a glimpse of this rabbi from Galilee, this miracle-worker who had reportedly raised a man from the dead, this man rumored to be the Messiah. Perhaps in that crowd was the former blind man, the one who had his sight restored. Perhaps in the crowd was the woman caught in adultery, the one who had her dignity and sense of self-worth restored. Perhaps in the crowd was Zacchaeus, the wee little tree-climbing tax collector from Jericho, the one who had his public honor and integrity restored. Perhaps in the crowd was Lazarus, the one who had his very *life* restored ... all by the grace of Jesus Christ, the central figure in this parade. The crowd certainly included hungry people Jesus had fed, sick people Jesus had healed, despairing people to whom Jesus had given hope.

We have to appreciate this was a politically charged event, as well (*and not because He rode a donkey instead of an elephant; this isn't a Democrat/Republican thing*). The palm branch, also colloquially known as the Hosannah branch, was something of a nationalistic symbol, almost like a Jewish flag ... and these people waving these branches so dear to their faith and their heritage are doing so defiantly in full view of the Romans who had strictly forbidden such displays of patriotic faithfulness. No doubt about it, Jesus deliberately chose to make this boldly public entry into Jerusalem. For Jesus, it was the end of all privacy, anonymity and safety, and the beginning of what would be an inevitable collision course with the political and priestly authorities. Again, this step was taken deliberately, with every consideration for the consequences; after all, He and the disciples could have simply slipped in quietly and unceremoniously into the city along with the thousands of Passover pilgrims. We may have been a bit hard on the disciples over the centuries, but let us not underestimate and/or under-appreciate their courage in accompanying Jesus here. These bold and courageous men were all taking a tremendous risk, and they knew it.

On the lips of the passionate crowd as Jesus rode up into the city on that donkey were the words, "*Hosannah! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the LORD!*" This is actually a quote from Psalm 118:25. Psalm 118 was part of the Passover liturgy; it was the last of a series of Psalms sung by pilgrims as they ascended the Holy City on their way to the Passover celebration. A little trivia quiz: Do you remember which chapter is in the very center of the Bible? (*I mentioned this on Palm Sunday five years ago, ten years ago & twenty years ago, so I'm SURE all of you remember, right?*). The center chapter of the Bible is Psalm 118 (*I confess I haven't counted this out myself; I'm trusting other sources*). There are exactly 594 chapters in the Bible before Psalm 118, and exactly 594 chapters in the Bible after Psalm 118. Now ... if you add 594 and 594, what do you get? 1188. (*Bear with me a moment; I know*

numbers can be hard to follow in a public speaking context.) Do you know what is the *central verse* in the entire Bible? Psalm 118:8. What does that central verse of the Scripture say? Psalm 118:8 -- *"It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man."* So, if you want a *central focus* for your life, start with this *central verse* of the Bible, which is both literally and figuratively THE *central mandate* of Scripture! This is the *central thing* to get straight. **"PUT YOUR TRUST IN THE LORD."** Put your trust in this Lord Who is passionate about you and your well being and the well being of all whom you love! So, this Psalm at the center of the Scriptures is the Psalm on the lips of those who hailed the One Who was the center of this processional parade, Who also happens to be THE central figure of the entire Bible!

I also often like to note on Palm Sunday just who (*or what*) else is at the center of this parade. I'll give a hint: Who was at the center of our little parade this morning? Hannah, the donkey. The donkey is at the center of the original Palm Sunday parade as well, playing a central supporting role! And as I mentioned on past Palm Sundays, this donkey is an ideal model for the faithful Christian. Why is this beast an ideal model? I'm glad you asked! Before I answer, I want to preface it by giving two other reasons why Jesus chose this particular mode of transportation I've pointed these out in Palm Sundays past ... if you remember, I'm flattered, but (a) the review may do you good and (b) others here haven't heard this before!

THE FIRST REASON: Every faithful Jew of Jesus' day knew Zechariah's prophecy referred to in our Responsive Reading. Zechariah foresaw Israel's Messiah, Israel's king, coming to Jerusalem, *"... meek and riding on a donkey, riding upon the foal of a donkey."* And here comes Jesus, riding on this foal of a donkey, right on up to the Golden Gate of the Holy City (*the gate prophesied by Ezekiel*). By deliberately choosing to ride this foal of a donkey through this particular gate, Jesus unabashedly and boldly presented Himself to the people of Israel as the fulfillment of this very well-known prophecy. THE SECOND REASON: It was an ancient tradition that when an arriving king rode upon a donkey, it was a sign he came in peace. The *horse* was the mount of war; the *donkey* was the mount of peace. The horse puts the rider high and above the heads of others, the donkey does not. In fact, sitting on the short-legged beasts puts the rider pretty much at eye level with a standing crowd. Mounted on the original "Low Rider," Jesus rode in the midst of the crowd, at eye level, being as much a part of the crush as all the others crowding that city during Passover. This King of Kings is also the Prince of Peace. He rode upon a donkey; He was not coming to do battle with the occupying Romans as the more zealous hoped.

But I've long believed the best reason Jesus chose this particular steed is one easily overlooked amid the Hosannahs and the hubbub. This foal upon which Jesus rode *had never been ridden before*. This is profound! In the midst of this excited, loud, exuberant crowd, this *unbroken* animal remains calm and compliant and cooperative with a passenger on his back. And this is not just any animal; this is a *donkey* ... an animal renowned for its dig-in-the-heels stubbornness and non-compliance. But I think this particular unbroken, untamed donkey carrying Jesus instinctively *recognized* his Creator, the Ruler of all nature, and allowed himself to be *"broken"* by Him, to be *tamed* by Him, to be *used* by Him. The donkey willingly and immediately subjected itself in humble obedience to its Lord to be used for whatever purpose its Creator desired, and it obediently carried his Lord into his world. I think the unspoken message of Jesus exemplified by His deliberate choice of this particular steed is, *"Now look, everyone. If a simple jack ... DONKEY can understand Who I am and respond accordingly, well, how about you?"*

So, at the center of this drama is a creature that has long been depicted as the perennial symbol of stubborn foolishness. Something of God's humor is on display here, for *this particular donkey* is on center stage depicting the epitome of wisdom, not foolishness. *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom."* We talked about the value of names last week; well, I don't mind that my daughter has the same name as the donkey in our little processional reenactment today! I've always wanted my children to imitate this supporting character; I want ALL of us to imitate this donkey, allow Jesus Christ to have full "rein" (*and reign!*) in our lives, as we carry Him into the places where we live our lives.

The mission of the church is to carry Christ into the world; each of us has a high calling to be a lowly donkey. It may not seem a glamorous or glorious role, but we support the One Who is ultimately glamorous, glorious! Of course, donkeys are known to be stubborn and obstinate. From the days of the Old Testament onward, God's people have often been identified as stubborn and stiff-necked and obstinate. A donkey can be a stubborn steed with a mind of its own, BUT it will work hard and long and tirelessly when willing! That's an apt description of many a faithful Christian! God delights in people who have minds of their own and who choose to love Him with all of their mind, soul, heart and strength, working hard and long and tirelessly for His greater purposes. Let's learn a lesson about our high and lowly calling from this central supporting character; our high and lowly calling is simply to carry Christ wherever He wants us to take Him! Allow Him full "rein" in our lives, allow Him to bridle our passions, and willingly submit to His gentle, guiding control as we play key supporting roles in bringing his redeeming love into our worlds.

Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.