

Hail Him! Nail Him!

Sermon, April 10, 2022

Passion/Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week. 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. From "Hail Him!" to "Nail Him!" 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. Again, from "Hail Him!" to "Nail Him!" And just about every year I say to you please don't go from the "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday directly to the "Hallelujahs" of Easter Sunday and completely miss marking and commemorating and contemplating what takes place in between ... the events that are at the heart 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, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday!*).

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, the gate nearest to the temple, also 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 ever-growing 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. Surely 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.

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. When you read the gospels all the way through, you often see that when Jesus does a healing or a miracle, He says, "Don't tell anybody. Keep it quiet." He didn't want them to publicly proclaim Who He was just yet, perhaps because it would most likely draw unwanted attention from the religious and political authorities. But not today. He decides to ride in to Jerusalem, not walk in like everyone else; everything about this is intentional. And we know that "Hosannah" doesn't mean "Hooray;" the crowds are calling out "Save us, now!" which would certainly be a cause of consternation for the established authorities. And this is during Passover, when approximately three million faithful Jews are crowding the city and the surrounding villages to celebrate this festival commemorating their long-ago deliverance from another oppressor. Also, reading ahead a bit, we know the next day Jesus will go into the temple and overturn the tables and chase out the money changers with a whip, saying, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves." Well, the only one who has the right to enter a house and rearrange the furniture and chase people out is the Owner. In short, Jesus is boldly, publicly, intentionally declaring himself the Messianic king. He's forcing the issue. 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!" As mentioned during the Time With the Children, it is actually a quote from Psalm 118:25.¹ Psalm 118 was part of the Passover liturgy; it was the last of a series of Psalms sung by pilgrims as they ascended to the Holy City on their way to the Passover celebration. 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! And they are hailing Him as king. For now, anyway.

¹ Excerpt from "Time With the Children" -- The center chapter of the Bible is Psalm 118. The way the chapters are numbered is that here are exactly 594 chapters in the Bible before Psalm 118, and there are exactly 594 chapters in the Bible after Psalm 118. Now ... if you add 594 and 594, what do you get? 1188. 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 detail to get straight. "PUT YOUR TRUST IN THE LORD."

I also like to note every 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! Literally! As I've mentioned on several past Palm Sundays, this donkey is an inspirational model for the faithful Christian. Why is this beast an inspirational model for the faithful Christian? I'm glad you asked! But before I answer, I always like to note two other reasons why Jesus chose this particular steed for His mode of transportation.

THE FIRST REASON: Every faithful Jew of Jesus' day knew Zechariah's prophecy referred to in our Responsive Reading. Zechariah 9:9 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 in 589 BC*). By deliberately choosing to ride this particular donkey through this particular gate, Jesus unabashedly and boldly presented Himself to the people of Israel as the fulfillment of this well-known prophecy. No secret now. He is asserting Himself as King.

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. It's 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.

But I've long believed the best reason Jesus chose this particular steed is one easily overlooked. This donkey 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. Those of you who know anything about such animals know the first time you get on an animal that has never been ridden, it doesn't just say, "Oh, OK. Where do you want to go?" No, the animal freaks out; it always does! It has to be broken in. 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 the miracle on display here is that this particular donkey apparently *recognized* his Creator, the Ruler of all nature, submitted and allowed himself to be "*broken*" by Him, to be *tamed* by Him, to be *used* by Him, and remained calm amidst this exuberant, jostling crowd because he was under the guiding hand of the One Who calmed the sea. Perhaps the unspoken message of Jesus exemplified by His 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?*"

A line from Psalm 51, David's psalm of repentance, which we recite each Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten season: "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*" David was not talking about a broken spirit or a broken heart as we would talk about a broken spirit or a broken heart; God does not delight in crushing us or disappointing us or causing us pain, sadness or sorrow. No, David means this: When we willingly bring our hearts and spirits under God's "rein", when we allow ourselves to be *broken* by God in this sense, used by God, controlled by God, this gives God delight. A synonym for "broken" is "meek." True meekness is not the negation of strength, it is strength under control; biblical meekness is exemplified in the meekness of this central bestial character of the Palm Sunday procession. For that matter, the One Who entered Jerusalem "*... meek and riding on a donkey.*" was the epitome of tremendous strength, unlimited power, incomprehensible might under control ... in the meek Jesus, we have the ultimate GENTLE-man. As did this donkey, may we allow Jesus Christ full rein and full *r-e-i-g-n* in our lives; may we allow Him to bridle our passions, may we willingly submit to the gentle, guiding control of the King of Kings that we might be used by Him for His greater purposes.

Yes, on Palm Sunday, many were shouting, "*Hail him, hail him!*" And in five days many will be shouting, "*Nail him, nail him!*" The old spiritual asks, "*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*" And the answer is, "*Yes, you were there, and I was there.*" Before we look too smugly upon the fickle crowds, let us acknowledge we, too, have a place among those who cried, "*Hail Him!*" and we, too, have a place among those who cried, "*Nail Him!*" As the prophet Isaiah foretold, He was wounded for whose transgressions? Our transgressions. I think it was Martin Luther who said that every one of us carry around in our pockets the nails of the crucifixion. Sometimes we need to be reminded of the rather obvious fact that by our sin we are among the crucifiers. We need to humbly acknowledge, confess, own up to our sin, repent, and then make every effort to live grateful lives that **hail** Him, not lives that **nail** Him.

And each of us has a high calling to be a lowly donkey; the mission of the church is to carry Christ into the world. Allow Him full "rein" in your lives, allow Him to bridle your passions and harness your strengths, and willingly submit to His gentle, guiding control as you carry Him and His redeeming love into the Jerusalems where you live.

Please stand to sing Hymn #173, second stanza only.

*Praise Him! Praise Him! Jesus our blessed redeemer! For our sins He suffered and bled and died;
He our Rock, our hope of eternal salvation, Hail Him! Hail Him! Jesus the Crucified.
Sound His praises! Jesus who bore our sorrows, love unbounded, wonderful deep and strong:
Praise Him! Praise Him! Tell of his excellent greatness. Praise Him! Praise Him! ever in joyful song!*