

April 13th, 2025 Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40; 23:36-38 “God Moves Toward the Cross”

I have a complicated relationship with Palm Sunday. On the one hand, I love processing into the sanctuary singing the “Le-Lo-Lay-Lo” song that Katy taught us ... what ... *eight or nine* years ago? It can be a very uplifting service during a season marked by self-denial. You go five weeks without whatever you gave up for Lent. Maybe you’re a little grumpy because you regret giving up coffee or chocolate, or whatever you gave up. You’ve sat through five sermons about how Jesus calls us to do some things that are tough, and yes we’re talking about you, Beatitudes and Parable of the Prodigal Son! You learn that discipleship can be hard work and maybe you’re feeling like you’re just not up to the task. You’ve got one more week of self-denial left and then boom! Along comes Palm Sunday! And it’s quite a production in many churches. Some churches have special banners just for Palm Sunday. They’re only up for one Sunday a year, but at least it’s a break from those old dark blue banners. We’ve even got a section in our hymnal devoted to Palm Sunday songs. Okay, it’s only three songs in our Chalice Hymnal, and one in our Chalice Praise book, but you know what I mean. Palm Sunday is *big* in some churches. There was a minister in Southside Virginia who liked donkeys as much as I like goats. He even had a donkey puppet that he brought out at Palm Sunday for children’s moment. And it was a ratty old thing, he must have had it for decades. He was a master at dad jokes long before it was cool to tell dad jokes. He said, “Want to know what my donkey’s name is?” I said, “Sure. I’m curious.” He said, “Hotay.” I said, “That’s a strange name.” He said, “No it’s not! Think about it – his name is, ‘Donkey Hotay.’” Every year he’d tell that terrible joke. Went right over the kids’ heads, but most of the adults got it. Doesn’t mean they laughed, but they got it. Hey, listen - I’ve seen some churches bring in real donkeys on Palm Sunday!

A little over the top? Probably. But fun? Yes! How can you not appreciate a donkey? On the other hand, I also recognize that Palm

Sunday, as we read about it in the Bible, wasn't an entirely uplifting event when you think about it. It's an important event to be sure. All four gospels include this story of Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem. When this scripture comes up in the lectionary, no matter what year it is, it means we're getting down to the last days of Jesus' life before his crucifixion and resurrection. Yes, it was a parade, and people lined up on that road leading to the back gates of Jerusalem in order to welcome the one who they believed was the Messiah. It was a stark juxtaposition of the kind of parade that took place at the main gates when a Roman dignitary like Pontius Pilate came to town. And yes, people were shouting, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." But they were also shouting, "Hosannah."

"Hosannah" is a word that the church often uses interchangeably with the word "Hallelujah" which means "Praise God." "Hosannah" is *not* a declaration of praise. You wouldn't know it if you looked it up in a dictionary though. Here's the definition you'll typically find on Google Dictionary - "A term in Judaic and Christian traditions used to express adoration, praise, or joy." Yes, that's what the word has evolved into, but it literally means "save us," which is, in many cases, a cry of desperation. "Save us" from what? For the people gathered there at the back gate to Jerusalem, it was, "Save us from our oppressors. Save us from King Herod. Save us from Caesar. Their reign might benefit *some* people, but the rest of us? We're only seeing the burdens, not the benefits." The people wanted a different kind of King than Herod, and they put all their hopes in this non-conventional King who seemed to represent the very opposite values of what most of the world thought a king should represent. Jesus was a paradoxical King. Sure, he was royalty, and his lineage could be traced back to King David, but he was poor and came from a region that was considered "backwoods." We get so caught up in the branch waving and "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" part of this event that we fail to see what an important part that paradox is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why I included this other passage from Luke 22. This is a much more somber scripture reading. I know, "Thanks pastor Jesse, we were hoping for a donkey." We tend to skip over this part of the passion story. We go from waving palms one Sunday to singing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" the next Sunday. We go from one celebration to another. If you skip Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, you don't get to experience the whiplash of Jesus' last week. We don't get to see the paradox of Jesus. Nowhere is the irony of Jesus' life stronger than in the expectations of his royalty. He is descended from David, the greatest king of Israel. He is the messiah, the anointed one, who is expected to rule and reign forever. In three of the gospels, Mary, the sister of Martha, anointed Jesus with expensive oil in the way that earthly kings are anointed before they take the throne. If a king-to-be is making his way to the palace, it's time for a coronation. It's time to receive a crown. What we see here in this account of Jesus' arriving in Jerusalem is the groundwork being laid for Jesus to take the throne. But look what happens here in this passage from Luke 23. He is being mocked by the lackeys of Earth's kingdom. "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." We heard that phrase back in Luke 4 when Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness too. "If you are the son of God, turn these stones to bread. Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple and call in the angels to save you."

His "coronation" is nothing like what anyone following the story of his royal aspirations would have ever expected. He is moving to his kingdom by way of the cross. Kings are not martyrs. At least they're not supposed to be. They do not die self-sacrificial deaths. They're supposed to live happily ever after with their queen by the side. In some cases they heroically die at the hands of an enemy or a rival, but always self-protectively, not self-sacrificially. Here in this passage, the King of Kings is given a crown to wear, but it's a crown of thorns. And he's not on a throne, he's on a cross where a placard is placed over his head – "This is the King of the Jews." Instead of a royal cupbearer bringing the best wine to him, he is given sour wine. Instead of commanding an army, he is surrounded by soldiers who mock and beat him.

There is only one person in this story who does not use his title unironically. See, Jesus didn't die alone. He died with one criminal on his right and one on his left. Near the end of his life, he finally hears the single voice of sincerity among the insults of the crowd when one of the thieves says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Finally! He's finally hailed as the true king that he is! Yeah, but it's a *thief* that recognizes him. Jesus spent so much time explaining and demonstrating what the kingdom of God looks like, and *still* we have a hard time understanding it. Is it a mustard seed? Is it a pearl? Yeast working its way through dough? If his kingdom, which he took such pains to describe, was so hard to grasp, it's no wonder we have a hard time recognizing him as a king in the end. Again, Jesus' whole life was a paradox. His actions were unexpected. His choice of followers were startling to say the least. His path to power was a path to defeat and death. The cross is the final moment of confusion for the "royal watchers" among us. This can't be it! Can it? Can *this* be what he was intending to do with his reign?

Here's something to think about during this last week of Lenten season - If God met our expectations of what kind of king Jesus would be, how small would God's kingdom be? If the kind of king we *anticipated* came to rule, wouldn't that have been just as short-lived as any other earthly kingdom? Would the king, surrounded by wealth and glory and power reign for just as long as a single human life could handle those things? See, we have Jesus, the unexpected king -- his final throne a cross, his final words a proclamation of forgiveness, his final act one that ensured that *this* kingdom ... *his* kingdom would have no end.

Save us O Blessed King -- the one who comes in the name of the Lord.