

Rejoicing in the Shadow of the Cross

Matthew 21:1-16

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We draw near to Jerusalem this morning. With our palms and our songs we seek to re-enact the joy of that crowd just outside the gates of Jerusalem, welcoming Jesus here as our King. But is that crowd merely confused? And isn't the whole idea of Palm Sunday a little confused? I mean, it's still Lent; it's supposed to be a somber season of repentance, giving up chocolate or beer or whatever, and preparing ourselves to be serious on Thursday night or Friday when we think about Jesus' death. How is it that we're having a party this morning? Isn't this a little like breaking out the Easter eggs a week early?

Many churches have actually changed the name of this Sunday to "Passion Sunday." They read the story of the crucifixion today, because they know that many people will skip the services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and never hear about the cross if they go straight from Palm Sunday to Easter. But I know that you will be here on Thursday night, so I don't have any problem making this a service of praise. Besides that, Palm Sunday has been observed in the church since the fourth century. I can't believe that now in the twenty-first century the act of praising Christ as our King has suddenly been discovered to be hazardous to our spiritual health. I can't believe that we're in any grave danger of praising Christ too much or too often.

That still leaves us with the question: How can we rejoice on Palm Sunday, knowing what we know? We know what is going to happen to Jesus once he gets inside Jerusalem. We know what the authorities will do to him. We know what a mockery the Romans will make of his kingship. Jesus is on the way to his death, his terrible lonely shameful execution. How can we celebrate? How can anyone rejoice in the shadow of the cross?

How could *Jesus* enter into this celebration? Matthew makes it clear that Jesus did not merely tolerate this parade, he instigated it. Jesus planned this carefully to be an unveiling of his identity. After long secrecy, Jesus was finally announcing publicly by this gesture that he was indeed the Messiah. The whole city is thrown into an uproar, a tumult, the same word that is used later by Matthew to mean an earthquake. The mood is exultant and it seems that Jesus is exultant in spite of his clear knowledge that he is going to his death. No longer does Jesus instruct people to tell no one who he is. He lets them shout it out. He defends the children who hail him as "Son of David" and calls this "perfect praise."

What I notice in Matthew's story is the complete lack of irony. There is no tragic cast over this story, no ambivalence on the part of Jesus toward accepting this praise, knowing what will happen. In Matthew chapter 20, Jesus predicts his death a third time and says that he came to give his life as a ransom for many. But when we come to chapter 21, everything is joyful and Jesus is being received rightly as who he is, the King and the Son of David. You see, it's not that Matthew is somehow less sophisticated than we are about the mixture of joy and sorrow in this life. On the contrary, I think he's onto something here. Looking back at these events in the light of Easter, Matthew can see that Jesus really was and is King, in spite of his rejection and suffering -- no, he might say *because* of his rejection and suffering. And Matthew is showing us something profound in this story about the possibility of rejoicing even in the face of suffering.

Most sermons on Palm Sunday highlight the contrast between the acclaim of the crowd on Sunday and the violent rejection of the crowd on Friday. The idea in such a sermon is to

make sure people see the irony in the scene and to jump on the hypocrisy and fickleness of the people in Jerusalem and thence to jump on the hypocrisy and fickleness of the people in the pews. I've preached a few of those sermons myself. But it seems to me now that such an interpretation sees Palm Sunday entirely in the shadow of the cross and not at all in the light of Easter. It also seems far from Matthew's purpose.

My view of Palm Sunday has evolved over the course of my life. When I was a child, I was like the children in the Temple in verse 15. Of course praise is good. I love Jesus and I love a parade. I didn't see anything negative about this day. As a teenager I developed a great sensitivity to adult hypocrisy (teenage hypocrisy didn't exist as far as I was concerned). It seemed to me that the praise of the crowd outside Jerusalem was as hypocritical as most praise on Sunday mornings, so I was quick to stand in judgment on the crowd, just as I was quick to condemn the people around me in church. As a young adult, I was proud of a highly developed sense of the ironic and the tragic. Perhaps this was the price of being an English major. So I saw in Palm Sunday the terrible irony of the praise which would turn to shouts of "Crucify!" and the acclaim of Jesus as King which would end in a purple robe and a crown of thorns. I imagined Jesus on Palm Sunday as consumed by the pathos of the scene and acting graciously to accept the misguided praises of his worshipers.

Now I am older. And one of the big lessons of middle age has been the possibility of praise. The harder life gets, the more I need to stand with this crowd at the parade, the more I need to say out loud who Jesus is. I have almost cycled back to a "second naiveté," back to childhood's joy in singing to Jesus. I have learned that a sense of irony and tragedy will make you feel wise, but it will not sustain you in the hour of darkness. What sustains you is a sense of hope in God's reign. What keeps you going is knowing that He is Lord. So the story of Palm Sunday has come to mean to me that whatever pain, whatever losses lie ahead, God's people can still celebrate in hope.

For many of you, this will not be an easy week. For some of you, there are no easy weeks. You understand what it is to stand like Jesus in the midst of the praise of God at the beginning of the week, knowing that you face rejection and pain and excruciating choices. Still, there is a part of you that wants to join this crowd. There is a child within you who wants to sing in the Temple and hear Jesus say that it is perfect praise.

Who is it that rejoices in the shadow of the cross? From Matthew's story we can see three kinds of people who are able to rejoice.

1. Those who believe the humble servant is king. From Matthew's viewpoint, after Easter, it is clear that Jesus is indeed king, the one to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth" is given. The crowd on Palm Sunday was not mistaken about who Jesus is, both prophet and king. When the people cry out to acclaim Jesus as "Son of David" they are saying that he is the promised savior-king from the line of David. Matthew accepts that title as proper, and begins his gospel with the words "The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David." For those who are under the shadow of suffering, no statement of faith is more important than the statement that Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The events of Holy Week will make no sense if we do not begin with the understanding that Jesus is a royal figure making royal pronouncements and reigning even from the cross.

But what kind of king is Jesus? He is a king who comes to us in humility. He is a servant ruler. This is the significance of the donkey on which he rides. Jesus has just been talking about being a servant. Take a look at the episode in Matthew 20:20ff: the mother of two disciples came to Jesus and asked that her sons be given seats of power at Jesus' right and left

hand. She still thinks that his kingdom is only about earthly power and glory. Jesus asks them if they are willing to drink the cup of suffering which is what his kingdom will require. Then he tells the disciples that anyone who wants to be like Jesus and be first in his kingdom must not think of authority as something to be lorded over other people. His kingly authority is a matter of servanthood. Jesus did not come into the world to be served, to be waited upon by his subjects, but rather to serve his people by giving his life for them.

When Jesus tells the disciples to get him a donkey to ride on, he is intentionally picking a symbol of the lowly and peaceful. He made it clear that the Messiah, the Son of David, would not be a warrior king. People might have expected the Messiah to ride into town on a war-horse, decked out in military finery and armor, but Jesus came riding a mother donkey still tied to her little one, seated not on purple but on peasants' clothes. Jesus says he is the one who is "meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29) and here he has in mind Zechariah 9:9 which promises a king who is meek and riding a donkey. Why does the sight of him lift our hearts? Because it reveals to us that the great King who rules over all that is does not lord his authority over us. He does not come with a sword to bend us to his will. He humbles himself and takes the form of a servant, because his purpose is to give himself for us. The one who rules the universe is the one who loved us so much that he gave his life that we might live.

2. Those who can live in the present and in the ultimate future. Most of us when faced with a Palm Sunday situation spend the whole day worrying about what is going to happen at the end of the week. How can I be joyful on Sunday when I know what is going to face me at the doctor's office tomorrow? Jesus models a way of being joyful for us. First, the joyful person lives in the present. Enjoy this celebration for what it is. Let yourself enjoy being in the midst of God's people with their hearts and voices raised. Take God where you find him right now and thank God for his provision in this moment, without keeping one anxious eye on the needs of tomorrow.

But the second key to joy is to live in the future -- not in the mid-range future where all our expected troubles are, but in the ultimate future when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that time when God shall wipe away every tear and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Most of us get bogged down in the middle, in that intermediate future between the events we can actually control now and the final future which only God controls. There's no point in worrying about what might happen between now and then. The apostle Paul modeled this most of the time, rejoicing in the present whatever the circumstances and rejoicing in "that day," the day of resurrection. Those are the two times that really matter.

3. Those who know they need a Savior. The word "Hosanna" which is shouted by the crowd and by the children literally means "Save us!" They were joyful at Jesus' coming because they were desperate for someone to help them, to free them, to lead them. If they had felt no need for a Savior, the appearance of someone playing the role of Messiah would have been of no interest. If we come here this morning with no sense that we need someone to come to our rescue, if we feel that we have our lives pretty much under control without God or Christ, then experiencing joy is not a possibility. But if we come here this morning feeling that we need freedom and forgiveness and faith, then seeing Jesus reveal himself to be a Savior who came to give himself for us out of love will make us say "Yes! This is what I've been waiting for!"

Throughout Matthew, the people who call Jesus "Son of David" are those who are asking to be healed, and they say invariably "Have mercy on us" (9:27,15:22,20:30,31). Just before Jesus came to Jerusalem, on the road from Jericho he encountered two blind men who called out

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" The crowd told them to be quiet. Maybe you hear some voices telling you to be quiet right now: Don't bother Jesus, he doesn't have time for you. But the two blind men shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" Jesus stopped and he had compassion on them and touched them and they received their sight. They saw Jesus for who he was. "Immediately," Matthew says, "they followed him." I wonder if the crowd of joyful people who followed Jesus into Jerusalem did not include people Jesus had healed who now knew for themselves who he was. Many of us in this crowd have felt his healing touch. We know the change that began when we first cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us!" We join in singing his praises today because we know that Jesus is the Savior we need.