

4-5-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 21: 1-17 Who Is This? PALM SUNDAY

I have loved Palm Sunday ever since Rob and I were members of a large Presbyterian church in University Place, where I caught the excitement of the crowd of children processing into the sanctuary, dressed in costume, and waving their palms as we adults sang. There's an excitement on Palm Sunday even though we know what comes next in Jesus' life.

I confess this year though, during this coronavirus season I call Coronatide, I read Matthew's story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem differently. Matthew describes the very situation we're doing our best to avoid: Crowds of people standing and walking close to each another, no social distancing, spraying out their germs with their cheers with no face masks, touching one another and handing tree branches and cloaks to each other without gloves or hand sanitizer. This year, as we stay home to protect ourselves and others, Matthew's Palm Sunday story sounds downright dangerous! In fact, I need some hand sanitizer just thinking about it!

There, I feel better. Many of us know the Palm Sunday story. Jesus had decided to head into Jerusalem even though he knew that the religious leaders were out to get him. He sent a couple of his disciples ahead with instructions that they were to obtain a young donkey that they would find tied up in town. And if anyone challenged them, they were to tell them, "The Lord needs it." And they found everything just as Jesus had said.

Jesus climbed onto the donkey, sitting on his disciples' cloaks, and began the trek down the hill into Jerusalem. Along the way, a crowd gathered and began to shout, "Hosanna in the highest!" The crowd kept growing as they came closer to Jerusalem, waving tree branches they had broken off on the way, and shouting in excitement, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" This was their Messiah, the Holy One they had expected for so long to come and rescue them from the Romans and bring them peace; the prophesied son of King David, had finally come. Blessed is the One... who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the One... who comes in the name of the Lord!

When they all arrived in Jerusalem, the townspeople watched Jesus ride in on his donkey with all the shouting and wondered what was going on. They hadn't heard a king was coming. Besides, kings rode into cities on their royal

stallions portraying their power and wealth and military might. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey. What kind of king does that? No wonder the townspeople asked, “Who **is** this?”

How would you answer their question, “Who **is** this?” The cheering crowd answered, “Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth.” They weren’t wrong exactly, but they didn’t have it exactly right either. The words they had shouted as they came into town were right- *Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna to the Son of David.* But what they expected and wanted was not what God sent. They wanted their idea of a *real* king, a powerful human king, to kick the Romans out and make their lives better. God sent what they needed- a Savior King riding on a donkey.

Aren’t we like the crowd sometimes? What we see in Jesus is who we want Jesus to be, not who Jesus is. We see someone who answers our prayers the way we pray them, and is powerful enough to make our lives easier, maybe even richer. Some people prefer a more distant Jesus, who inspires them, but certainly doesn’t ask much of them, or meddle in their lives. Some see Jesus as a great teacher who lived and died tragically long ago, someone to appreciate, but no more. So I ask, how do **you** answer the question, “Who **is** this?” As we head toward Good Friday and Easter, it’s an important question. Because just as that week was long ago in Jerusalem, it’s a week of decision for us. Can we say sincerely with the Apostle Paul, that we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead? If so, are we following him as Lord?

The second part of this story I want us to notice this morning is Jesus’ interaction with the children in the temple. My image of what was happening was that the children who had been part of the cheering crowd were still excited. And they were acting like children do when they’re excited, running around in the temple laughing and cheering, “Hosanna!” Maybe even doing their version of the Name Game Song:

“Ho-**san**-na, Lana, **bo** Bana,
Banana fanna **fo** Fana,
Fee fy mo Ma-na,
Ho-**san**-na!”

And of course, those children got on the adults' nerves. We get that way sometimes, don't we, when kids act like kids during church? It makes us adults who prefer quiet and orderly, irritated. Like us, the religious leaders wanted the children to pipe down.

But Jesus didn't agree and quoted Psalm 8:2 to them: *'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise.'* Sometimes the Lord **loves** what irritates us- like the sincere praise of children. Small children have a way of putting their whole selves into what they do, unafraid to wear costumes and make noise, to express their feelings. They build forts out of rocks and make toys out of sticks, they find joy in a butterfly that we adults miss as we hurry past, and they believe before they fully understand.

Jesus had already told his disciples earlier to be childlike, *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* We adults have a lot to learn about being childlike- not childish, throwing temper tantrums, but childlike- in our faith and our worship, unafraid to express what we think and feel, not worried about what people might think if we lift our hands, tap our toes, or even dance, willing to try new things, and singing outloud even when everyone knows we can't carry a tune in a basket. Jesus invites us to be childlike- humble, trusting, fully in the moment, and letting our praise flow like children who know we're loved for who we are.

During this challenging season of Coronatide, I invite us to practice two spiritual disciplines we see in Matthew's Palm Sunday story:

1. During Holy Week this week, let's make time to meditate on who Jesus is on the pages of scripture. To read the story of Jesus on his way to the cross and the tomb. Only 2 chapters- Matthew 26-27. As we read, let's listen to what is said about Jesus, what Jesus does, and what Jesus says about himself. And reflect on the question for ourselves, "Who is this?"
2. And during all of this season of Coronatide, let's practice being more childlike, living more fully in the moment, try something new without being afraid of failing, really notice the world and people around us, and praise God in a different, less-familiar way. We might even rediscover the kind of joy children know.