

In this House, We Receive...

John 12:12-16

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ March 24, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

15 “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

16 His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. (John 12:12-16)



I’m by no means putting myself in the same category as Jesus when I say this. But I, too rode into town on a small pony. When I turned 16, I inherited my grandmother’s Ford Pinto. It looked just like this, except mine was a much cooler dark blue that “matched” the orange and red plaid upholstery. The Pinto, as some of you know, was the epitome of humility in the vehicle world. But I loved that car. In my mind, when I looked out on the driveway at that car, under inches of snow (because my parents didn’t think it worth having garage space), it looked and felt more like this to me.

That first winter, my dad put fully studded metal snow tires on the car that more than doubled the value of that car, which was 15 years old when I got it. It was a tank in the snow, but that didn’t mean a 16-year-old driver couldn’t still get it to slide. But I will say, there were many people that just didn’t understand. They didn’t realize the peace I had knowing that whenever I hit a snowbank that was mostly ice or hit various street signs (hypothetically), I didn’t have to run off to the insurance company to get it fixed. Those extra “memory markers” actually made it worth *more*. At least to me. And it just

kept running better and better. At least to me. My friends were jealous of how I could get into it with a pair of tweezers and start the engine with a screwdriver. I knew I had something special. A lot of stories behind that humble car. Sadly, we eventually sold it—for less than the cost of those snow tires.

Most people didn’t realize the incredible gift of peace that Jesus was offering by climbing on a donkey. They were looking for a solution to present problems instead of something deeper and more eternal.

But Jesus found a donkey, and sat on it...

I’ve read and reread this passage this week trying to see this through the eyes of those gathered, wondering what Jesus was trying to communicate. I’m encouraged that it’s written here that even his disciples did not understand these things yet. But I’m also challenged that maybe I don’t fully know what Jesus brings here.

The people were so eager for a King. They even go so far as to call Jesus the “King of Israel” and to bring palm branches. Palm branches weren’t just a nice decoration for a party. They were a symbol of welcoming a king who had returned from a victorious battle or was preparing to lead his troops out. Most of those with a palm branch in their hands were holding out hopes that Israel would finally be able to defeat the enemies that surrounded them and held them captives, especially the Romans but also others that surrounded them.

The crowd seemed to be on board with the idea of welcoming a victorious King. They even knew their Bibles, knew the prophecies about the Messiah. They were quoting Psalm 118: *Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord*. But then they added a line that’s not in this Psalm of victory: They call him the *King of Israel*. I’m sure they meant it as a compliment. I’m sure Jesus didn’t take it as one. Even at this point in Jesus’ ministry, they have missed the part that Jesus comes as *everyone’s* King, and a very different kind of King than they have in mind. A king not as concerned with the politics of the day but with the hearts of those that are calling him king.

As the people are quoting Psalm 118, they skip over, or at least ignore, a couple really important parts of this Psalm. It opens with:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
Let the house of Aaron say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
Let those who fear the Lord say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”¹

You can't argue with this repeated message of God's steadfast love, but listen to who is saying it. First, the nation of Israel is saying it. Israel who complained their way through the desert and turned their backs on God every chance they got, and God still loved them. Yes, you, Israel, say “His steadfast love endures forever.” You know it's true more than anyone.

Next, it's the House of Aaron, which is a house *within* Israel. That makes sense. This is the house that is a part of the tribe of Levites (bear with me) who are the priests of the Israelites. Yes. The religious leaders who made a golden calf for the people to worship when God fell silent, and led them into strange religious practices instead of staying faithful to their call. Okay, we'll have grace even on you. Let those religious leaders say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

But what about the last group? *All* of those that fear the Lord? This includes gentiles, non-Israelites. Even those among Israel's enemies that realize he's on the throne. They too get to be a part of the crowd saying, “His steadfast love endures forever.” Everyone willing to say *that* can call Jesus *their* King, too.

But here the crowd welcomes him *only* as King of Israel.

Again and again and again throughout Jesus' life and ministry he was confronted with people that thought they had special privilege because of their ancestry, or their position in the religious world, or their wealth, or because of the way they lived their lives. None of it matters! Jesus was everyone's King.

But there was another important piece that this crowd skipped over. In Matthew's version, he points this out to them later. Just four verses before “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”:

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;

it is marvelous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.²

Jesus is going to be the cornerstone. God will do it. The day will be marvelous. That will be the day the lord has made and we will rejoice. But first? Do you see the important word that seems to be lost on the people holding the palms? He will be rejected.

A lot is going to happen between this Sunday and the next Sunday. It will end in a day the Lord has made. But most of what will happen in between could be summarized in one word: *Rejection*. For now, Jesus seems to let them just celebrate as he rides in on his humble donkey.

Whenever I've thought of Palm Sunday, I always picture Jerusalem. It turns out, this didn't take place in Jerusalem. It says in John's account that the people *heard he was coming to Jerusalem*. It doesn't say he was there yet. He's on the way. In other accounts, they were near Bethphage or Bethany, towns outside of Jerusalem, and Jesus sends his disciples into the next village to get the donkey.

In Luke's account, he wanted us to remember what happened right after this, when Jerusalem did finally come into view. When you approach Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is the most popular way to come in, I would think, it's where all the iconic pictures of Jerusalem are taken. There's a moment when the whole city lays out before you from a high point. It's here that we read what happened next:

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”³

He's weeping for the actual rocks the city is made of. But, even more, he's weeping because if this Sunday is any indication, then next week, at God's greatest moment of history, these people won't get it.

Jesus is afraid that when the enemies surround the people, they will see it as a betrayal of this King of

¹ Psalm 118:1-4

² Psalm 118:22-24

³ Luke 19:41-44

Israel they are claiming him to be. Instead of “This is the day that God has made,” they’ll be saying, “This is the day God did nothing to defeat our enemies.”

Jesus weeps because they don’t see the gift that he is offering. The gift is that when the earthly enemies do come (and they will always come, even if the present ones are defeated), the people won’t realize that God gives them a deep peace, an invisible strength that will help them persevere *in the midst of* the fires and floods and battles.

This moment has a triumphant feel because of the crowds arriving for the Passover. Apparently, the city population would swell to 5-10 times the amount of people during the Passover. It’s triumphant because of what people have heard about him—his miracles and his teaching—but mostly his miracles. And they are on their way because news spread quickly that Jesus just brought a dead guy named Lazarus back to life. This is his next stop. He is no longer trying to hide the fact that he’s the Messiah. He even made the claim in chapter 11: “I am the resurrection and the life.” But the crowds didn’t know how literally he meant it.

But the triumph was tempered by the fact Jesus knew death was coming. He’d been talking about with his disciples. They should have known something was off here. And it was tempered by the fact that their expectations were lowered. This is definitely not the “Braveheart” moment that the people with cloaks and palms had hoped for.

That invisible strength is the gift that Jesus offers. To the Philippian church, a church familiar with struggle, he calls this invisible strength a “peace that passes understanding.” According to Paul, we will know this incredible peace. When? Does he say that the peace comes when God takes away all their problems? No. Does it come when their enemies are defeated? No. It comes because “The Lord is near.” The enemies and the problems remain and God walks with them through it all.

Invisible strength.

When you imagine this scene of Jesus on this humble creature with no weapons, and no show of power, hopefully we will still see this invisible strength.

Paul wanted it for the Philippians, Jesus wanted it for the people in the crowds and his own followers. I want it for all of us. For us to walk into the pain and struggle that awaits us outside of those doors and inside our own hearts and to claim peace anyway—to be one of those that says, “His steadfast love endures forever!”

In Dale Bruner’s translation of this passage, he adds a very important “but” to the next verse. But Jesus finds a donkey. We don’t get as much information about this process of getting the donkey in John’s account here, but the fact that it follows their quoting of Psalm 118 says three things:

1. Instead of offering a war-cry, he brings humility and the gift of peace
2. Instead of coming as “Israel’s King” he comes as everyone’s king
3. Instead of a show of visible force, he offers invisible strength

This week, my daughter achieved a goal of running the mile at school in a certain time that earned her an award. She was telling me how it hurt, but she just pushed on. I told her that our bodies have a strength to keep going much more than we realize.

To that she said I needed to apply that to our next ballet lesson. I told her it was a limited analogy. I do know from *some of* the ballet drills she has taught me that ballet *develops* inner strength that she probably doesn’t even realize. This week was parent observation week. After about 30 minutes of barre exercises where there seemed to just be a lot of toe tapping and arm waving and repetitive movement, the teacher turned to the parents and said, “I know, it looks boring right now. But they need to do this to develop the finer muscles they need to do the more exciting things for longer periods of time.”

Every athlete knows how important the humble movements are for training the body for the moments when it will be put under great stress. The point is not to avoid the stress, but to be ready for it.

Why should it be any different for our lives of faith?

Rather than overthink what our action point should be from this moment in Jesus’ life, Jesus is inviting us to be a church that simply *receives* this gift of salvation that becomes a peace passing understanding. I’d like to offer an alternative to action this week as a way of training our muscles to simply rest in Jesus instead of needing our situation to change:

The acronym is STAY:

Sit – instead of feeling the need to rise up
Trust – instead of feeling the need to strategize
Ask – instead of feeling the need to know
Yield – instead of feeling the need to go

We so badly want to know how we can join the battle and take care of the problems. There will be a time for

that. By sitting, trusting, asking, and yielding, we can first receive. For some of us, this goes against our nature. But Easter will have greater meaning if we do. Sometimes, just staying can be counter-cultural enough to make a real difference.

When we think of Rosa Parks' decision to just sit and trust—to stay put on the bus—we don't consider her to be passive. She made a decision that came from a deeper kind of peace, and did what she knew was right. She wasn't trying to start a movement. She was just tired of the injustice. The name of her book is called *Quiet Strength*. She had it.

There's a common sermon on Palm Sunday that goes something like this: "Remember that the same people who shouted "Hosanna!" on Palm Sunday are the same ones who shouted "Crucify him!" on Good Friday. It preaches well, because it calls us to take action and avoid being that part of the crowd. But it's probably not accurate.

As Jesus enters the city, there are at least three different crowds of people, and probably a complex mix of others, that all come from different directions. His closest friends and disciples that have followed him and grown in great numbers meet with Jews coming out of Jerusalem to meet this so-called Messiah, mixed with Pharisees and others from the church that are trying to quiet the crowd.

Jesus' demonstration of riding in when everyone else was walking was not for all for show. He was fulfilling a prophecy that would have been a great assurance for many of the ones shouting Hosannas. He was giving them an invisible strength that they would desperately need to get through the next weekend. To be sure, they did not all rally to Jesus' side when the going got tough. Most of them fled. They were still afraid. But they were likely not the ones crying "Crucify Him!" Their faith would draw them back to him after the Resurrection in profound way—in a way that led them to live a life of "Passing the Peace" to one another and to the world—to offer the gift naturally as part of their new lives.

Part of this receiving might be to remember the "faith capital" that God put in your lives. Moments in which we know God was present in difficult circumstances. I have to believe that those closest to Jesus in that moment saw that donkey as the most majestic creature on the planet because they knew who was riding it. They were still walking high from the recent memory of their friend Lazarus being raised from the dead. They were there when Jesus fed the 5,000, walked on water, cast out demons, and said not to worry at wedding where he turned the water into wine.

I know there are stories in this room that give this community some "faith capital" if we remember them and share them again with each other.

I encouraged the children to talk about what it means to pass the peace. I hope you will consider this as well. When we are saying to another person on a Sunday morning, "The peace of Christ be with you," we are not just saying hello. We are offering an invisible strength that comes Jesus to meet the pain of the week behind and the demands of the week ahead.

And we don't have to offer it only in our church. Jesus was just starting to pass the peace to the whole world, to any that would receive it. We do that, too, automatically, once we receive the gift Jesus offers to us first.

Amen.



The Next Step

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read John 12:12-16 again slowly. Pay close attention to something you might not have noticed before.
2. What kinds of people do you imagine were in the crowd that day? What were some of the expectations of the various people?
3. What significance might the palm branches have had in this situation as they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem? Can you imagine a more fitting way to honor Jesus at that moment?
4. Read Psalm 118:25-26, which is quoted by the crowds. What differences do you notice? What do the people add to this Psalm? How does this give away their expectations?
5. Now read Zechariah 9:9-10. How does Jesus' choice of animal begin to correct the expectations of the people?
6. Is it possible that our own expectations of Jesus need to be corrected? How do we need this as a community? How do we need this personally?
7. Some of those in the crowd were carrying evidence of Christ's power (invisible strength) that likely served as a gift of peace for them. What do you carry with you to "remember the things that were written of him" (see verse 16)? How do they give you strength when you need it most?

8. How can you shift to a posture of receiving Christ's peace during this last week of Lent? (Perhaps one of the suggestions from "STAY": Sit, Trust, Ask, Yield.)

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Table to Table

A question for kids and adults to answer together.

What are we doing when we "pass the peace" during worship? Are there ways we can do this with other people outside of church?