

## **Listen to the Children!**

Psalms 118:1-2,19-29

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-16

April 2, 2023

Palm – Passion Sunday

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### **I**

Do you have a special Palm Sunday memory? I remember as a child we'd always go by our friends the Yocums before church and snip a white rose, they had lots of rose bushes, and all our family would put a rose on our jacket or dress. Now I do not exactly see the connection between roses and palms. I think it was just a nice family tradition. Today I wonder whether the children here parading in waving palm branches, lovingly prepared by our Flower Guild, singing "Hosanna" like in the Bible, I wonder if years later they will look back on this as a special memory?

On Palm Sunday we enter the heart and center of our Christian Faith – the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It all comes into sharp focus as Jesus makes his humble yet noble awe-filled, joyous entrance into Jerusalem coming directly to the ancient holy temple. Today listen to the children!

Today we enter into the Great Tradition. The majestic processional hymn with which we began, "All Glory, Laud, and Honor to Thee Redeemer, King! To whom the lips of children Made sweet hosannas ring!", dates back to the year 820 A.D. when it was first used as a Palm Sunday Processional written by a monk in Florence, Italy named Theodulph of Orleans. The events of this day and this week have been at the heart of the church's memory, central in its scripture, and celebrated in the worship of the church from the very beginning.

These events almost give us whiplash, our heads spinning quickly from joyous praise to dark intrigue. Everything is unfolding as through a pair of bi-focal glasses. Through one lens we see a parade, praise joy, hope for liberation from Roman oppressors. Through the other lens we see plotting and scheming and whispering among the political and religious establishment seeking Jesus' demise.

Through one lens the crowd cheers him, praising him as their coming Messiah, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Come and save us, Hosanna!" Through the other lens five days later the same crowd will jeer him and call for his execution. "Let him be crucified!"

Through one lens all seems utterly random, chaotic, crowded streets, betrayal, arrest, denial, trial, condemnation, and finally execution by crucifixion. Through the other lens, the steady rhythmic drumbeat of the unfolding deliberate plan and purpose of the will of God. Even the readiness of a man to offer up his donkey for Jesus' use is set forth as part of God's plan, whether the man had been contacted by Jesus ahead of time, or whether, by the Spirit, the man just knew what to do. "If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.'"<sup>i</sup>

And so, it unfolds over this week as Jesus today receives the praises of the crowd, and especially the children, everyone laying their coats on the road before him, waving palm branches, symbols of Jewish victory and peace, and shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”<sup>ii</sup> The last time Jerusalem had a palm branch parade like this was 150 years earlier when Judas Maccabaeus paraded through the streets with his Jewish forces having defeated the Greek forces of Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Many hoped Jesus would come as just such a Messiah to deliver them from their occupiers.

## II

Immediately on entering the Eastern Gate Jesus comes directly to the great temple, first built by Solomon, rebuilt by the Jews returning from Babylonian Exile under Ezra and Nehemiah, and more recently expanded by King Herod the Great who added its stunning broad open plaza, covering about a quarter of the Old City. Ironically the temple, central place where Israel went to encounter God becomes the epicenter of the opposition to God’s Son. Early in his confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus had said, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.”<sup>iii</sup> Now Jesus demonstrates he truly is, as he, with steady unrelenting pace makes his way to his ultimate confrontation with evil and the heart of darkness.

Today, though, it is the voices of the children that ring out, in the streets and in the temple. Jesus goes to the temple to purify it of the merchandising going on there, yes that, but more to cleanse it at the loss of its initial holy purpose as a place of prayer for all people, a place to encounter the Living Holy One of Israel. Now it has been commandeered by religious bureaucrats who have made the worship of God into a business with a series of mechanical exercises that keep the people at bay, and under their control, and enrich the merchants who have turned temple sacrifice into a sort of financial side show.

It was the prophet Jeremiah who 600 years earlier first spoke God’s word, decrying abuses going on in the temple, when he warned,

“Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.”<sup>iv</sup>

On entering the temple grounds, seeing what is taking place, Jesus is outraged! Immediately he powerfully, single-handedly, overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers. With immense physical force, the very power of God coursing through his veins, unchallenged by anyone, this courageous young man chases them all away saying,

“My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.”<sup>v</sup>

The vendors are run off. Instead now the blind and the lame are led in to him there in the temple, and the children too – all these meet Jesus in that sacred space where under the old law they were forbidden to enter. Here Jesus heals them. Here the children continue singing their praises, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”

The chief priests and scribes are infuriated by all this. “Look what he is doing to our temple!” “This is getting out of hand!” “He must be stopped!” They demanded of him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” Jesus merely points them back to their own scriptures - Psalm 8, verse 2,

“Yes, have you never read, “out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?”<sup>vi</sup>

“Listen to the children.” The children are singing his praise. The children are welcoming him. More than all the rest of the sounds this day, it is the sounds of the children that ring out most. The children with their hosannas, their praises, the children who see him for who he really is. Children are gifted like that. Wordsworth wrote,

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close Upon the growing boy.”<sup>vii</sup>

The children see without guile. They see with open hearts who Jesus is. Jesus always welcomed the children. “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”<sup>viii</sup>

I love what we experienced after church last Sunday with the children, as we gathered in the library reception area, to celebrate the birthdays and baptisms of little newly baptized 2-year-old Jason Odii and six-month-old Jayden Odii. Jason was happy in a high chair, eating birthday cake and ice cream and playing with a red balloon. Jayden was content in his mother’s arms, both of them there beneath the warm embracing stained-glass window of Jesus welcoming the children. As many of our other children happily shared ice cream and cake with these boys!

Jesus comes to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to receive the children’s welcome, to cleanse, and to ultimately to destroy the old temple, now presenting the new temple in his own body for the salvation of the whole world, “I tell you not one stone will be left on another,” he had said. In three days, I will destroy this temple and in three days rebuild it where children will be welcomed, the blind and the lame healed and honored.”

### III

Last Monday unspeakable horror unfolded in Nashville, TN at Covenant School. Six people were gunned down by a troubled young woman carrying two assault rifles and a pistol. Three nine-year-old children, three adults in their 60’s. Our daughter Catherine and her family are friends of many of the young families at Covenant, and yesterday attended the funeral of Cindy Peak, who was the mother-in-law of one of Catherine’s dearest friends, college roommate, and bridesmaid in her wedding.

Last Tuesday the Chaplain of the United States Senate, Barry Black offered this prayer:

“Eternal God, we stand in awe of you. Lord when babies die at a church school it is time for us to move beyond thoughts and prayers. Remind our lawmakers of the words of the British lawmaker Edmund Burke – ‘All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.’ Lord deliver our senators from the paralysis of analysis that waits for the miraculous. Use them to battle demonic forces that seek to engulf us. We pray in your powerful name. Amen.

On Palm – Passion Sunday we see up close and personal the demonic forces that Jesus confronted long ago, and although he has completed the work of our salvation, still these evil demonic forces reach out their tentacles and ensnare the lives of innocent people. Make no mistake, evil is real. As Paul writes to the Ephesians,

“Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”<sup>ix</sup>

Jesus comes to do the heavy lifting on the Cross battling these spiritual forces for us and for our salvation. “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,” wrote the Apostle Paul.

God opens the way for us through what he undergoes this week. But now he calls us to become partners with him in the work of healing a broken bleeding world where evil is right here around us.

Our world is in trouble. Our nation, so full of promise and potential, is in trouble, stuck in a purgatory of polarized paralysis, between right and left, deep ugly divisions, leaders unable to act, while evil continues to burst into churches and schools.

Here is the underlying problem. We have forgotten God. Our foundational values, grounded in faith and appropriate patriotism are shaking more than ever before. “40,000 children since 2019 have had their studies interrupted by gunfire and fear and trauma most adults have never known,”<sup>x</sup> unless they have been in warfare. We see what unfettered access to military assault weapons is doing to our children and our nation, yet we seem unable to summon the will to act.

An article in the Wall Street Journal this past Tuesday, the same day Chaplain Black’s offered his Senate prayer, declared, “Poll Shows Shift in What Americans Value,” indicating that patriotism and religion and having children hold less importance across this country, while having money holds more importance. Listen,

“Only 38% of respondents said patriotism was very important to them, and 39% said religion was very important. That was down sharply from when the Journal first asked the question in 1998, when 70% deemed patriotism to be very important, and 62% said so of religion.”<sup>xi</sup>

Where is righteous anger and healing action that would clean out the temple? Where is simple common sense that would protect our children? How can we sit back and fail to wisely regulate the sale and possession of guns and the complete banning of military assault weapons by any other than the military and the police?

“Listen to the children!” Jesus came to bring us his peace. Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace is more than quiet acquiescence. It is positive. It is active. It engages. Shalom represents the deepest dreams of the ancient prophets. As theologian Neil Plantinga puts it, shalom entails, “the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment and delight.”<sup>xii</sup>

This is what Jesus came to earth to bring, peace, shalom, justice, fulfilment, and delight. The high holy God came down to earth, low low low to earth, to bring us together in love. He said, “My peace (Shalom) I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give unto you. Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

As the Apostle Paul testifies to the Philippians,

“Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross.”<sup>xiii</sup>

On Palm Sunday, after three years teaching and healing and announcing a new kingdom with a new way of living as his followers, Jesus comes to Jerusalem to fulfill his destiny

He enters the old temple to complete his purpose and erect something new in its place, the temple he will build through his own body. His body broken. His blood shed. Yes, in Jesus, something greater than the temple is here. Where Jesus is the blind and the lame are healed and the children are welcomed and sing his praises. “Listen to the children!”

Soren Kjerkegaard asked,

“What is the difference between an admirer and a follower?”

He answered,

“A follower is or strives to be what he admires. An admirer, however, keeps himself personally detached. He fails to see that what is admired involves a claim upon him, and then he fails to be or strive to be what he admires.”<sup>xiv</sup>

On May 2, 1963, sixty years and a month ago, more than 1000 school children skipped classes and gathered at Sixth Street Baptist Church then marched peacefully through Birmingham in support of equal civil rights for all people whatever their race. The police met them with dogs and fire hoses. But it was the children’s voices that were heard, not the dogs and fire hoses, and ultimately justice was done.

On May 2, 1963 more than 1000 school children skipped classes and gathered at 6<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church to march peacefully through Birmingham in support of civil rights. The police met them with dogs and fire hoses. But the children's voice was heard and ultimately justice was done.

Admirer, follower, which will you decide, and decide today, to be?

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

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<sup>i</sup> Mt. 21:3

<sup>ii</sup> Mt. 21:9

<sup>iii</sup> Mt. 12:6

<sup>iv</sup> Jeremiah 7:4-7

<sup>v</sup> Mt. 21:12-13

<sup>vi</sup> Mt. 21:

<sup>vii</sup> William Wordsworth, “Ode On Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood

<sup>viii</sup> Mt. 19:14

<sup>ix</sup> Eph. 6:12

<sup>x</sup> John Archibald article in the Lede, 3-29-23

<sup>xi</sup> Wall Street Journal, p.A4, , 3-28-23

<sup>xii</sup> Neill Plantinga, quoted by Glenn McDonald, “Morning Reflection”, 3-29-23

<sup>xiii</sup> Philippians 2:6-8

<sup>xiv</sup> Soren Kjerkegaard, Bread and Wine, p.56