

Scripture Lesson: Mark 11:1-11

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 44-45

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Response to the Word

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God

P: Thanks be to God!

Mark 11:1-11

03/24/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“People’s Cheering”

Pastor Amy Terhune

I was reminded this week that it was right around this time of year back in 1966 that, “...pop music icon John Lennon set off a firestorm in this country by declaring that his band, The Beatles, were more popular than Jesus. And with teenage girls, that may well have been true.

“But the truth is that the Beatles owe much of their popularity to the manager Brian Epstein, who hired teenager girls and actors portraying EMTs and Police Officers. With cameras rolling, the girls carrying signs and adoring expressions, were then instructed to ‘lose their minds’ at the sight of the Beatles. They were to start screaming and going berserk with excitement.” The actors portraying EMTs would then rush in and carry off girls as they supposedly fainted to waiting ambulances. While all this was going on, the would-be police officers were instructed to “fight a losing battle,” in trying to contain the hysteria in the crowd.

“Those videos found the way into the hands of the news media around the world, and the by the time the Beatles actually came to the U.S. Beatlemania had taken the country by storm, the fab four were met by thousands of screaming girls who were losing their minds and fainting all over the place! And the rest, as they say, is history! Of course, it didn’t hurt that the Beatles actually were relatively talented musicians and song-writers.

“For most of his ministry. Jesus did all he could to discourage his disciples from publicizing his work. The last thing Jesus needed or wanted was a marketing genius hyping his ministry. But when you are a man who can heal the sick, raise the dead and feed people by the thousands, it is difficult to keep the word from getting out. [4 ¶s adapted from “No Promotion Required” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com. Original source: from caleb@multichannelmarketing.com.]

So it may seem odd that Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, his feet practically dragging on the ground, surrounded by a rag-tag band of Galileans and a gaggle of women and children. Where are the silver trumpets blaring out his arrival? Where's the red carpet? Mark tells it like this: "...they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields."

Let me just take a moment with that because it points us to the real impact of this day. Leonard Sweet makes a point of noting that people laid cloaks on the ground. And it's not because Jesus is a fair maiden being protected from the mud, either. After all, he's going to slog through the mud and much, much worse before this week is out. Instead, Sweet writes: "...According to ancient Jewish law, there were moral limits on what could be demanded in payment for debts. Among those things that were legally "off-limits" was a person's most important piece of clothing – their "cloak." Less substantial garments could be held as collateral, as could household items, but a person's cloak was in a category by itself. A cloak offered warmth, protection, and modesty. A cloak doubled as clothing and shelter, functioning as haberdashery by day and as a bedroll by night. You could take a lot in payment for debts, but you could not take the cloak off someone's back.

"But a cloak could always be OFFERED... To lay down one's cloak was to lay down one's life, one's security. It was not only to bare one's back, but also one's soul. [2 ¶s from "When to Take the Shirt off Your Back" by Leonard Sweet, www.Sermons.com.] So when the text tells you they laid down their cloaks, that's a detail worth reflecting upon.

Others cut leafy branches from the fields and spread them on the road. They could have been palms – why not! A cynic might point out that those who cut palms chose something that didn't require anything of them. It's not the same kind of gesture as laying down your cloak. It's not baring your back or your soul. And the cynic would undoubtedly point out that of course a palm is the symbol the church has chosen for today – the one that asks nothing of us. Back in the 1990s, a bumper sticker came out that said "honk if you love Jesus". I had a friend in seminary who confessed to me that he had one of those for a while. But time passed and he forgot about it. People would honk at him, and he couldn't understand why, and he'd get pretty upset until his wife reminded him about the bumper sticker. So he scraped it off. He didn't want to be honked at. A couple of years later, another bumper sticker came out. It said "Tithe if you love Jesus. Anyone can honk." Not that bumper stickers normally offer solid theology. And not that tithing (which means to give a tenth of one's income to the church) is the only way to prove commitment. But it's closer to the mark. Not as popular, but closer to the point.

The palms we use today are saved and burnt for next year's ashes for Ash Wednesday. They represent our sinfulness, our brokenness, or reluctance to make the harder choice. But we observe this day knowing full well that Jesus did make the harder choice. That Jesus came to save us from our sinfulness, our brokenness, and yes, our apathy.

There's an old story about a little girl who came home from worship one Palm Sunday. Her father asked what she had learned that day. She told him she learned all about the crowd waving their palm branches and singing a song to Jesus. The father was pleased that she had learned so much. He asked, "What was the song they were singing to Jesus?" And the little girl began to sing:

*Oh, I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee
And I'm going to Louisiana, oh, my true love for to see
It rained all night the day I left, the weather, it was dry,
The sun so hot, I froze myself, Susanna don't you cry.*

Oh Susanna, don't you cry for me, for I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee!

[Story from "Eight Days Until Eternity" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Alas, they were not singing “O Susanna!” On that first Palm Sunday, the people shouted “Hosanna” as they laid down their cloaks and their branches. It means “Save us!” But there’s an urgency to it. It’s not “save us someday”. It’s “save us now!” Of course, what those of Jesus’ time wanted was for a Messiah to come and liberate Israel. They were looking for someone who would throw off the Roman Empire and re-establish Jewish autonomy. They wanted a King of David’s lineage. And Jesus appeared to fit the part. He comes in exactly the way the Zachariah 9 says that the Messiah will come. Listen to it: ⁹*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* ¹⁰*He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.* ¹¹*As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.* ¹²*Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.* ¹³*For I have bent Judah as my bow; I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will arouse your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and wield you like a warrior’s sword.”* (Zachariah 9:9-13).

No wonder they expect Jesus to take control. He rides in like it says, so why shouldn’t they expect him to cut off the chariot and war horse, to be roused to war like a warrior’s sword. And yet, Jesus does command peace to the nations. He does set us free from the waterless pit, the dryness of a despair. He does indeed claim us as prisoners of hope – what a fantastic image. A prisoner of hope is the most free of all creatures. But the original Palm Sunday crowd has got their preconceived notions, you see.

They’re willing to throw off their cloak in order to throw off Rome. But when Jesus issues a call to commitment rather than arms, the cloaks are snatched back. And as the day draws to a close, the anticlimax is palpable. Jesus goes to the temple like a good hero would, but he simply looks around and then goes out again. Because he sees the seeds of the discontent already laying among the palms. He grieves our failure to dream bigger for what might yet be. He asked them to give up a shallow dream of military might in exchange for a profound dream of a whole new world—one of justice, equality, and mutual respect. But the crowds didn’t buy into the dream. It looks so good, in a way—the donkey, the parade, the fanfare. Jesus looked the part, but he didn’t say the right lines. Jesus was simply not what people wanted. They wanted a king who would justify their lifestyle, decimate their enemies, vindicate their selfishness, and confirm their prejudices. They want him to take up their cause, and he takes up a cross instead. And so the crowd that cheered for him Sunday clamored for his death by Friday.

The truth is that we want the same kind of King – one who will justify our lifestyle, decimate our enemies, vindicate our selfishness, and confirm our prejudices. One who agrees with us. And if we don’t get it, we crucify the real one and remake Jesus in our own image – a Jesus that will rally; a Jesus that’s easy; a Jesus that will sell, but that can’t possibly save. You see, Jesus’ whole entrance into the city was a challenge to their world, and to ours. It says God’s ways are not the world’s ways. It says love and not hatred is what God most desires. It says that human strength and wisdom alone cannot save us—the divine must be at work within us. It calls us to the hard work of love. It calls us to hope, to peace, to sacrifice.

On Palm Sunday, we celebrate with a parade, but today is not really about fanfare. Jesus is the Lord of Life. They may not have understood it back then, but with 2000 years of retrospect, we know it now! And yet, Jesus’ life, his teachings, his death, his resurrection—they still challenge our world today. We have observed this day for centuries because it begins the week that changed the world. We have to slog through it. Hosannas today, hushed voices in an upper room on Thursday, harsh

soldiers that night, hell itself come Friday. We have to walk through it all one day at a time and remember the story—what Jesus went through: acclaim, betrayal, denial, trial, torture, death. This is the week that shows us the humbling reality of sin, the renewing energy of grace, the ultimate power of love. This week, we cannot disconnect one event from another, as if they have no bearing on each other. If Good Friday is to heal us and cleanse us, if Easter is to empower and energize us, then today must make us look frankly at our own hearts, to recognize that our hearts need healing, cleansing, empowering. Today, we need to say “hosanna” – save us! And we need to recognize the urgency.

We are a broken people—broken by sin, failure, compromise, temptation. We need a savior, even if we don’t know it. Thankfully, God does know it. And God gave what was needed. At enormous personal cost, God gave what was needed. God heard our Hosanna. God gave us a savior.

Because despite all our weakness, all our sin, God thinks we’re worth saving. And looking full on at our weakness and our sin, Jesus somehow challenges us to rise above it. Jesus enters Jerusalem then and our hearts today in defiance of all that human nature is, as if to say, “You can be better.” With Jesus, there’s always the invitation to move closer, dig deeper, go further. With Jesus, there’s always an invitation to lay down our cloaks, to bare our backs and our souls, to bear another’s burden.

And so we join the parade, not because we love a party, but because someplace deep inside of us, we share a conviction that where he is leading and what he is offering is better than where we are now; because despite the ways of the world and persuasions of our culture, enough of us really aren’t content to just cheer from the sidelines. We want to lay down our palms. We want to lay down our cloaks. We want to lay down our sins and our brokenness. We want to be prisoners of hope. Hosanna! Save us! It’s not a cheer. It’s a prayer. And this week, my friends, God answers it. Amen.