

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Matthew 21:1-17

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

April 5, 2020

Holy and Almighty God, we have journeyed with you through another season of Lent. As we process now into a Holy Week, keep us grounded and faithful. Allow us walk with you into all of the events of what the week holds. As we come again before your Word today, engage our hearts and minds and spirits. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our Broken Hosannas

Sometime this past week, in the midst of some restlessness, I took my two year old outside of our front yard to play on a scooter someone had gifted us a while back. We had bought him a helmet for it and everything but at the time he was too small and did not quite understand the concept of how to ride it. He's been growing and changing by leaps and bounds these days so I decided to give it another try.

As I set it up for him and put his helmet on, he just looked at it like "What am I supposed to do with it?" so my 28 week pregnant self got on this tiny scooter and tried to demonstrate what he was supposed to do. I'm sure if there were any onlookers it was amusing. It really is not as easy as it looks. ☺

Well, it took less than a minute of me "demonstrating how to scooter" for him to grow his toddler confidence tenfold and tell me he was ready to try it by himself. With a huge grin he got on the scooter and did exactly what he was supposed to do and for about 3-5 seconds, he was a pro scooter rider. With pure joy on his face and his mouth gaping open, he was a big boy on a scooter. And then on that sixth second, he began to slowly lose his balance and I heard his little voice exclaim, "WOAH" as he fell down.

The first time he fell, after the momentary look of surprise of hitting the pavement, he immediately smiled and got right back up and tried again. Then again, a few seconds later, he would fall, smile, get back up and try again. He did this about 4-5 times and although he would get back up and try again, you could see the slow look of discouragement beginning to form the more he fell and had to get back up. Eventually, he was like, "Okay, I'm done now" and we decided to just go for a walk around the block together.

As I watched him fall down and get back up and fall down and get back up, sometimes with a smile on his face and eventually with a slow look of

discouragement, I could not help but think about the waves of our own lives in these days that we are living in. Watching him, I felt like it was this great analogy not just of life in general, but especially life right now, these very days we are living in. I don't know about you, but it feels like a rollercoaster most days with waves of up and down, that I am feeling over and over very not over a span of a long time but sometimes within minutes or hours...feeling optimistic and sometimes even joyful mixed in with this thought of, "Oh man, am I going to keep falling down every time I get up?"

There's a meme going around that simply says, "This is the Lentiest Lent I've ever Lented" and boy does that feel ever so true. Walking through the wilderness with God, not knowing where we are going, where we are headed, but trusting the path laid out for us? Check, check, check. This Lent has not just been something to consider or reflect on hypothetically, but it's been our reality for the last 4 weeks or so. 2020, the year of the Lentiest Lent we've ever Lented.

And now here we are on the brink of another Holy Week and in light of these days and in light of this familiar story, I'm hesitant to even say we know what's coming anymore no matter how well we know the story. And you know, I think that's the irony, maybe even the grace of this particular Holy Week. Going through a Holy Week with a pandemic happening all around us almost forces us to rethink and reimagine this story and what it is Jesus does and says; it forces us to rethink and reimagine this story and what it is that the crowds do and say; it forces us to rethink and reimagine this story and what it is the disciples, those faithful followers do and say; and perhaps gives us a deeper insight into the fact that by the end of the week, no matter what anyone has done or said, for a moment, Christ will be all alone, wrestling with his own doubts, fears, solitude, and brokenness.

But today, well, we do not begin that way today. Today, like my toddler on his first couple of tries on that scooter, we begin with some hope, some faith, a peek at the light at the end of the tunnel. We begin with cries of yes, desperation, but they are intertwined with cries of hope. In the Hebrew, the word "Hosanna" does not mean, "woohoo!" or "Yay God!" It actually means, "Save us!" Hosanna, save us! But the crowds yelling this are not yelling this in fearful tears but today they're crying it in abundant hope...Abundant hope in the one who comes in the name of the Lord. You see, at this point, those shouting this, they have no doubt that this Jesus is going to be the one to save them from the evils of the Empire and the powers and principalities that have brought them down. Their cries of Hosanna, save us, is full of hope and belief, trust and the expectation that they're not going to be let down.

They've seen this guy feed thousands of people, work miracles of healing, speak and teach in ways that empower them and excite them about this upside down Kingdom of God. They've seen him advocate for the most vulnerable and speak justice to those who would oppress them. Even after this triumphant entry, Jesus will overturn tables and call people out on their corruption. So even though he comes in on a lowly donkey, the crowds and his disciples shout for the hope they see and believe will come through the person of Jesus Christ.

You know, many scholars now conclude that Jesus was not the only one processing into Jerusalem that day. If you've ever been to Jerusalem and to the Old City, you know that there are several "gates" of entrance. Scholars say that Jesus entered through one gate while on the other side, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, was also coming through. The Roman governor would have been coming in to "keep the peace" during the festival of the Passover to control the crowds. When you juxtapose these two images, it is quite the contrast:

Through one gate, a government official riding in majestically with horses and helmets and weapons to "keep the peace" and on the other, a carpenter turned rabbi swaying in on a colt to start a revolution that would change the world. The power of empire on display on one end, and the power of the kingdom of heaven on the other. Hosanna-Save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

That's exactly what Jesus' "triumphant" entry was that day. It was in its own way a confrontation to the powers that be-to show a different way, a willingness to stand against the oppressors and to declare hope, peace, and joy. And although we do not have official record of what the march looked like for Pilate as he entered into the city on the one side, the palms, the cloaks, the cries of joy on the other end could not be contained...so much so that Scripture tells us that after Jesus enters the city, the city is thrown into turmoil asking, "WHO IS THIS?" And at this point, the crowds are able to faithfully and boldly declare to anyone who asks, "This is the prophet, Jesus."

Friends, today, as we stand on the edge of another Holy Week, my question for us today is, "Who do we say Jesus is for us right now during this time in our history and moment in our lives? Who we will we end up saying Jesus is? Who is God for us right now and how is God present with us? Will we be faithful to our God or will we forget all about the hope we had clung to in the first place?"

I've had some time to reflect seriously about this and if I'm completely honest, it will probably be a good mixture of both feeling faithful and discouraged. You see, normally I'm on board with the humble donkey riding Jesus...but I realize that's because normally I have the choice, the option, to follow that one b/c usually, most of the time I'm feeling fine...I have the choice to follow the humble Jesus who isn't overbearing or powerful in the ways of the world...but in those moments when I'm really feeling discouraged, hopeless and frustrated and lost, do I really want to follow what looks like the weaker leader? The one who is not making any grand promises to me, the one who doesn't wear the right clothes, does not even have the right armor to protect himself...can this one protect me? Protect my family and our community?

Theologian Debie Thomas asks the same question but in a different way. She asks, "Will I choose the humble and the real? Or will I insist on the delusions of empire? Will I accompany Jesus on his ridiculous donkey, honoring the precarious path he has chosen? Or will my impatient and broken hosanna undermine my journey?"

In reference to Palm Sunday, Frederick Buechner writes this: "Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take."

Friends, isn't that how it feels these days? Up and down with despair and hope?

How many times are we willing to fall and get back up? How much more isolation, grief, deaths, uncertainty and disappointments must we face before we get to the end of the story, the part that promises resurrection? I cannot imagine most of it and quite frankly, I know that I cannot bear it alone.

So even as we shout our broken hosannas today, here is the good news.

God in Jesus Christ can bear it. We will not be left alone. Because the whole point of the Holy Week we will encounter again is the promise that, "*There is no death we will die, small or big, literal or figurative, that Jesus will not hold in his crucified arms*" (Debie Thomas).

Because this love of God, it all comes to a peak at a cross. It reaches its peak at the moment of true despair and loss. The powers and principalities of this world will try and crucify any kind of exhibition that does not conform to its power. And that crucifixion will look like victory to some and look like defeat to others. Sometimes it will look like hope and sometimes it will look like despair.

So friends, at least for today, as we process with Jesus into this Holy Week, let us shout our broken hosannas no matter where the path will lead us. Let us join in the hymn that says "Come thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace" ...Let's sing that grace. Let us shout with the crowds, Hosanna! Save us! Because whether we get back up with a smile on our face or just sit right down on the pavement, God in Christ will still go before us, sit alongside us, and come along behind us. He is the one who loves us on the days we shout Hosanna and on the days we will shout Crucify. He is the one who loves us as we share a meal with him and boldly claim to always be faithful, even when we will betray him. And he will still love us when we all walk away as he hangs on a cross alone. And although we might not know the details of how our own story intersects with this one in these days, what we do know is that the promise of resurrection is always there. That's the light at the end of this tunnel.

So sister and brothers and siblings in Christ, let u shout our broken hosannas and wave our branches. Hosanna! Save us! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Amen.