

Trinity United Methodist Church

April 5, 2020 (Palm Sunday)

“Hosanna!”

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Mark 11:1-11 (NIV)

1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’ ” 4 They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, 5 some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” 6 They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. 7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” 10 “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. We respond together, thanks be to God.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

I don’t know about you, but for me, this whole COVID-19 situation has been quite a humbling experience. I felt this most acutely during this past week. As was announced last Sunday, Bekah, my wife, is our new Youth Director here at Trinity. I guess I can work with her. But it is a joy to have somebody in place to lead our youth, and they have been meeting through Zoom and are planning for activities into the summer time, when hopefully we are able to get out and about and enjoy each other’s company.

But, as often happens in a staff transition, there is technology like computers and such that our former staff person, Robin Griffin, used, and that Bekah needs. So trying to set up the computer in the youth office with the necessary files carried over from Robin, but then to basically kind of restart and set it up like Bekah wants it. And through that process, I got hung up on the technology pieces so many times. And I got so incredibly frustrated with it. I spent nearly an entire day trying to work on this stinkin' computer. I couldn't figure out why it wouldn't do what I was telling it to do! You push the button, you hit the thing, you click the mouse, and it should do whatever I'm telling it to do, but it wouldn't. And I got so frustrated, and it dawned on me that I felt so out of control.

That's exactly what I was feeling two, three weeks ago when, like many of you, nearly everything – in fact, everything – that I was looking forward to doing was being canceled right and left. Concerts, sports, sporting events, kids' sports seasons, going to the movies, just going window shopping for something to do (I actually don't really like to do that, but *you* might like to do that). And all of those things were just being taken from us one after the other as things were being shut down, and rightly so.

But the final straw that broke the camel's back for me, so to speak – I was in kind of a slump, a low place about all these different things being canceled that I was looking forward to – what really did it for me was when I got the Bishop's e-mail that she was canceling worship for the following couple of weeks for us. Now, I appreciate the Bishop making that kind of call and looking out for our safety. But at the same time, that was just that moment that I just really hated it.

And it dawned on me that it was the exact same feeling I had when I pledged my band fraternity in college. If you have ever lived that Greek life (of course, nowadays you're a membership "candidate," not a pledge), when you're in that process, you're at the fraternity's beck and call. So whatever they say you need to be at, you've got to be there. And there were a couple weekends in there that I was trying to go home and they said, "Nope, we've got this going on. You can't go home. If you do, we're going to be really upset with you." And I remember at the end of that Spring semester in my freshman year just really venting to my pledge brothers and saying, "I'm so done with this. I've lost control of my life. I want to do what I want to do for a change." And thankfully we were inducted later that weekend, so that was a short-lived experience.

But this is *not* a short-lived experience in which we find ourselves out of control of our lives. In fact, if there's anything this experience is teaching all of us, among the many lessons, it's that we're not as in control as we thought we were, are we? I'm convinced that all of us have at least a small control freak in us, to one degree or another. Some of us are big control freaks. All of us have at least a little control freak inside of us. And when we lose that sense of control, we feel helpless, don't we?

The imagery that's come to mind from time to time has been like a punching bag, especially as the reports change so fast, especially as the restrictions grow tighter. And just as we got hit with one, *bam*, we get hit with another, and *bam*, we get hit with another, from all sides. Some of those punches land more than others, and they hurt more than others. Another image that comes to mind is like a wind-battered tree. The hurricane is just whipping through that tree, and that tree is just blowing all over the place, and by the time it's all over we're just like that tree. We're drooped over, we're wilted. We're missing branches, we're missing leaves, and so forth.

We feel helpless. But also, we should bear in mind that we're not unlike previous generations before us. I've heard it said that this experience of this COVID-19 quarantine, or stay-at-home, or whatever you want to call it, is our generation's September 11, or Kennedy assassination. Our children's children and grandchildren are one day going to be writing a report, maybe, at school about this. And they're going to ask us, "What was it like, living through this time right now?" And just like those generations before us, we're reminded: We're really out of control. We really don't have that level of control that we thought we did. We need help, because we feel helpless.

So where does that help come from? It's not unlike the circumstances which we find originally in Mark chapter 11. That's the context of Palm Sunday. And there is a wealth of imagery that is going on here in this particular scene. First of all, there's the imagery of Jesus riding triumphantly down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. And it's the imagery that those who first witnessed it would have immediately recognized as that of the people of the city coming out and welcoming home the conquering king. It was a Roman tradition, and I believe Greek also, in which as the king had been out and won all kinds of battles, as they returned back home to the city and particularly to the capital, the people inside the walls would come out and meet that dignitary, meet that hero, meet that king. "Praise Caesar!" Praise whoever it was. "You're back, you've won all these battles for our kingdom. You are awesome, and we are so excited you're home!"

And that's exactly what these people of Jerusalem are doing with Jesus. We read that some of them took their cloaks off and put them on the ground in front of Jesus as he passed by. That's because, remember that roads at that time certainly were not paved. Pretty much all of them were dirt, and particularly if it hadn't rained in some time, that dirt on the road would rise, would be kicked up, especially with such a throng of people and Jesus as he passed by. So, to keep that dirt from rising up and dirtying the dignitary, dirtying the king, people would put down their cloaks on the ground in front of them to keep that dirt down until that king had passed by. You see that going on as well.

But there's something different about this king that we read about in the gospels. This king rides into town on a donkey, and on the foal of a donkey, or a colt. A young one at that. Typically when these kings would ride into town, they would be mounted on

their noble steed. They would be riding big old horses like the Clydesdales at Busch Gardens. Have you ever seen those? They're huge horses, bigger than the average horse that we might see. That's the kind of majestic animal that the king would be riding in on. Maybe in parts of Africa they might ride in on an elephant, a big, majestic creature. But here, Jesus rides in on a donkey. Have you seen a donkey lately? Most of them that I've seen are dirty, because they're so low to the ground. Donkeys are servant animals. In ancient Israel especially, they would have been hooked up to the press to push that stone along as they would press the grain that they had there. The donkey was a service animal, not really fit for a king to ride in on. But this is a different kind of king, and we see the conflict right away. Jesus *is* a conquering king, no doubt. But He will conquer in a different way, a way of submission and humility.

Then we read about the imagery of the waving of palm branches for which this day gets its name. This act took place particularly in the festival of booths, or tabernacles, for the Jewish people. It was a harvest festival, where they would celebrate God's provision in the harvest. They would live in tents themselves, remembering how they lived in tents, how their ancestors lived in tents in the wilderness as they journeyed from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, and therefore how God delivered them and brought them into the Promised Land. And how God would be faithful to continue to do that again and again and again.

Particularly on the last day of that festival, the faithful people would recite Psalm 118, especially verse 25, which says, "Lord, save us. Lord, grant us success." And they over time began to use the wording for that as, "Hosanna," that we hear them say today. "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which means, "save, we pray," or "save us, we pray." It was originally an appeal for deliverance. "God, we're in trouble. Save us, we pray." It came in liturgical usage to serve over time as an expression of joy and praise for deliverance that had already been granted, and therefore deliverance that was anticipated as well. "God, you have saved us before. You have brought us to this Promised Land. God, you have provided for us before, and God, we know you are going to do it again. Save us, we pray."

And over time, therefore, as the expectation began to rise in the later years that we read about in the Old Testament through the prophets, there began to arise this hope of a messiah. And this phrase, "hosanna," and the waving of palm branches, began to coincide with this expectation for the messiah. For God's chosen king and the lion of David, who would one day conquer Israel's enemies and rule over Israel. So therefore, the crowd, and we who believe today, recognize that in Jesus, the age-old cry, "Lord, save us," has become the glad doxology, "Hosanna," which means for us who believe, "Praise God and His Messiah, we are saved." We are saved.

Yet we know from biblical scholarship that there are those like Judas Iscariot, who had a specific idea of what the Messiah would look like. Of what the Messiah would do. What kind of acts He would do. How the Messiah would conquer and make things right once and for all. And often these were more militant ideas. Certainly the Messiah would be a leader most in control.

And then there were those like the Pharisees, who watched this procession and in other gospels said, “Look at how the people have gone after him. We’ve got to do something about this guy.” Because, you see, they had their own agenda. That the Messiah would fit into their particular box, and therefore the Messiah would be one who *they* could control.

Do you notice a theme here? We human beings are wired to exert control. In the very beginning, when God first created us, we were commanded to fill the earth and subdue it, or to steward it, to take care of it. And that means having some control over it. God made us that way in His image. So what sin does, is it makes us think that we have, or should have, more control than what we actually have. Remember as the serpent came to Eve in the garden, it wasn’t a flat-out rebellion against God. It was, “Did God *really* say...?” It was, “maybe you have a little more control than you think you have.” And that’s the temptation that we continue to face. We make idols and gods out of things that we think we can control. Things like money and time and status and more. These are the gods that we expect to save us. And these are the gods that crises like these expose for who they are. They cannot save us. And in the end, they can’t even really help us.

And so, from where does our help come? Psalm 21 says, “I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore.”

Friends, this yearly celebration of Palm Sunday is so much more than a reenactment and remembering of a great scene in Jesus’ life. It’s a reminder of our constant need to cry out again and again, “Hosanna! Save us, we pray!” It’s also a reminder to shout and to sing, even in the midst of whatever storm we face, “Praise God and His Messiah, we are saved!” Pandemic or not.

So I want to close today by sharing with you something that God has really laid on my heart during this time. This whole stay-at-home order scenario is really redefining, making us really think about how it is that we do church. It’s really taken us back to the

example of the earliest days of the church, when the church was less about programming, because the programs happened at home. We didn't drop off our children, in particular, in Sunday School, even though we've got a fantastic children's program and Children's Director, Kim Orrock, here at Trinity. Those are excellent things, but we can't expect our one hour of Sunday morning with our kids downstairs to really form their faith as well as it could be. Just like we're all learning, as some of us are having to homeschool, as they say, that it's not just sending our kids for seven or eight hours a day to learn lessons, but that lessons really begin and are fulfilled at home. Discipleship is that way as well.

So I want to begin this Sunday by sharing with you some questions that you can find on our website. We'll be posting these and at least the link for these in the comments as you're watching this, this morning. And after we're done with worship, stay together as a family, as a household, there in your living room, wherever you're watching this, and ask each other these questions. Listen to each other. Ask followup questions. And then pray together about the joys and concerns that might arise out of this discussion. Think of these questions.

1. What has been most frustrating for you during this time of stay-at-home orders?
2. Have you experienced a loss of control, now or previously in life? And what lessons might you have learned previously that you can apply now? What lessons do you need to learn now, differently, that can help carry you forward?
3. What is your favorite part of the Palm Sunday story? (Maybe it's the donkey. Donkeys are kind of cute, right? Maybe it's Jesus riding on the donkey. Maybe it's the crowds, maybe it's the children shouting "Hosanna." Whatever the case might be.)
4. Remember that "Hosanna" means, "Save us, we pray," as well as "Praise God and His Messiah, we are saved!" For what do you need to shout and sing and/or pray, "Hosanna?"

This is a great time to proclaim, as they shouted long ago, "Hosanna!"