

“Spectacle”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 12:12-19
March 25, 2018
Palm Sunday

“His disciples did not understand these things at first...”

John writes about the twelve, but he could be writing about all the disciples who have sought to follow Jesus since. As we have worked our way through this gospel, we have noted repeatedly its many layers. In the Worship Reflection class, we’ve described John’s Gospel as being water in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim. We read these stories and find meaning and then, if we reread and ponder and argue with someone, we find a deeper meaning. And we find mystery and mysticism. And then we get confused. And that’s when we know we’ve really heard the Good News according to John.

I imagine the disciples witnessed this scene with the crowd and the palm branches and the hosannas and the psalm being shouted and Jesus and the donkey and wondered what the heck they were seeing. What was this spectacle? What was Jesus up to? And what did the crowd want? What were they looking for?

Is this spectacle a coronation? The crowd is certainly calling Jesus “king.”

Is it a victory parade? John is the only of the four gospels to tell us that the crowd waved palm branches. Palms were a symbol of victory throughout the ancient world that the gospel writers knew. Palms meant vanquished opponents. Palms meant our side had won. Palms meant celebration, like a post-war ticker-tape parade.

But it couldn’t be a victory parade or a coronation, the disciples would have thought. They had watched Jesus dodge crowds trying to crown him before. It started at the lake, after Jesus fed thousands with five barley loaves and two fish. The word started to spread through the crowd and the crowd started to get excited. Jesus could tell that a coronation-by-mob was about to happen. “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:14-15) He wanted no part of being made their king. Or at least the kind of king they wanted him to be.

Was it a protest march? At this point, the chief priests have let it be known in Jerusalem that anyone who knew the whereabouts of Jesus of Nazareth should report in so he could be arrested. These folks should be running to the nearest temple official to do their duty to the faith and the empire. Yet, here they stand, in the road, waving their victory palms and whooping and hollering.

They holler “Hosanna!” “Hosanna” would literally mean “save us!” But it was also an exclamation of jubilation. “Savior! Salvation!”

Was it a plea? “Save us, please! We pray for salvation! Is it you that will save us? Help us! Hosanna!”

Or was it testimony? “Savior! Help has arrived! Salvation! Hosanna!”

Were these the cries of people yearning for liberation? Or were they joyous outbursts led by those who had followed from Bethany, where they had seen a man dead for three days walk out of a tomb?

What was this spectacle? The disciples must have wondered in the moment, but John is just chock-full of retrospection, and so we are told they later remembered these things. Even then — even now — disciples would be filled with wonder and questions about it all.

Jesus knew what this spectacle was. It was a funeral march. It was his loud entry into a city in which he was *persona non grata*. It was the beginning of the end. It was his death sentence. It was the guarantee that the religious leaders would know he was there and that he in no way intended to disappear quietly. It was none of the things that the crowd might have intended: a coronation, a victory parade, a protest march, a plea, a testimony.

And, of course, it was all of those things. It was all of those things, but on a much bigger, more eternal, more cosmic scale than the crowd could possibly comprehend. They were part of something they could not see, and yet, they were part of it.

It was a coronation, but for a different kind of king. We tend to oversimplify things and say that 1st Century Jews were looking for a messiah who would be a military leader coming to overthrow the empire. The truth is much more complicated, with a variety of messy messianic hopes. But certainly nobody in this crowd — not even the disciples — would expect this man to be dead by the end of the week.

Jesus was not the first popular messiah-apparent. And so the religious leaders will take action to prevent conflict with Rome. They will collaborate with Rome to stop this false king who will bring ruin to the people. Jesus did not come into the world with any purpose other than to love and redeem it. His kingdom is humble and non-violent and sacrificial. It is the inside-out and upside-down reign of God that puts down roots of justice and peace that outlast any monarch and supersede any Caesar.

It was a victory parade, but not of Israel over Rome or one sect of Judaism over another. The victory is over death and hopelessness and indifference. It is a testament not solely to the sign done in the raising of Lazarus, but to the sweet victory of a Christ who marches toward death himself.

I got to visit the garden at Gethsemane this past spring. We stood on the hillside and looked across the valley at the temple mount. It wasn't far at all. Maybe a half mile. Our trip leader, Dr. Jeff Lenoard of Samford University, asked us to imagine that it was nighttime. There were no lampposts, no car headlights, no searchlights. One could stand in that garden in the dark and see the soldiers with their torches leave the temple and move down the paths toward the valley. In every other direction would be darkness and a million places to hide, a thousands ways to run. As the disciples slept, Jesus waited. He didn't come here to run. He didn't come here to save his life. He came here to let the world do what the world would do and transform our knowledge of death forever.

In the 4th Century, the Christian theologian Athanasius spoke about the crucifixion being the climax of the incarnation, that God becomes like us in Jesus so that we may become like God. Twelve centuries later, Martin Luther described the cross as the divine exchange where Christ takes our life and lot that we might enjoy his victory. Hosanna! Save us. Hosanna! Salvation has come.¹

This palm parade was both plea and testimony, and it is for us too. We gather each week and we pray for God to

¹David Lose at ...in the Meantime, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/palmpassion-sunday-b-entering-the-story/>

help us follow a narrow path of divine truth. And we declare boldly that God has done that just that. Already, we have received our salvation. Again, we cry out for it. *Help us. Thank you. Help us. Thank you.*

This palm parade was a protest — while a military parade on the other side of the city was completing its journey from Caesarea Maritima, bringing with it Pontius Pilate and all the force of the Pax Romana. The parade said, “you show off your armor and your power and your weapons and take glee in violence while people go hungry and children wail. We have seen real strength — Hosanna!”

With the ability to look back, we see this spectacle for what it is. The people want a king, but this king rides a donkey, not a war horse. The people claim victory and protest and salvation, but they do not know what they are asking for. By the end of the week, it will be “Crucify him!” that will echo through the streets of Jerusalem.

Aside from Jesus himself, perhaps it is the Pharisees who see best what is actually happening here. “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!” Right at the end of our service this morning, we’ll jump back to where we left Jesus in chapter nineteen of John, handed over to be crucified. The rest of that story will come to us on Thursday and Friday. But today we get the cross. John will tell us that Pilate had a sign put on the cross that read “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” And John will tell us that it was written in Hebrew, and Latin, and in Greek. The far reaches of the empire would be able to read that. The chief priests. Pilate. Casear. Citizens from north to south, east to west. It would be written for the world to understand.

So what about us? What is it that we are looking for as we wave our palms? We have not suddenly perfected understanding and aligned our expectations with God’s. So what is it, I wonder, that we expect from Jesus? Do we want to skip the stories of Thursday and Friday, in which the world turns and moves in the shadows of night and suffering and death are deemed the appropriate responses once the parade has quieted down? Do we want Jesus to have come for us alone — for the sign to be written in a language only we can read? Do we want Jesus to condemn those folks over there and to give us the royal thumbs up? Do we want a wink and a nod from Christ, letting us know that we get an exemption from the whole nonviolent, peacemaking, loving our neighbors and our enemies thing? Do we want justification for turning away from those in need? Do we want to hear him say, “you know I only meant to feed the sheep you deem worthy, right?”

What are we looking for?

I think it’s important to know what we want from this man on the donkey. It’s important to know what kind of parade we think this is. We need to be aware of our expectations so that we can fully understand why Jesus will have no part in meeting them. He has come not to affirm our prejudices, nor to free us from one another. He has come to be the light of the world and to free us from all that stops us from being God’s people in that world. He has come to declare victory for the reign of God not on our terms, but on the difficult-to-understand, even-harder-to-embrace, maddeningly grace-filled, peaceful, overwhelmingly-love-drenched terms that God has set out.

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
May we prepare ourselves for what that truly means.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.