

Waterford Mennonite Church

“Lord, save us!”

March 24, 2013

Purpose: To inspire the congregation to understand *hosanna* and to seek God’s saving and redemptive work in their lives as we accurately name who Jesus is.

Large crowds possess a certain level of energy and power just based on the magnitude of the multitude. I have heard it said that large crowds have the potential to present themselves as one unified body, as if each individual were simply part of one organism. For example, if only ten people join together in doing the wave, that action might be able to be easily overlooked. But if 10,000 people join together in doing the wave, it would be much more difficult for that action to be overlooked or ignored, simply based on the sheer magnitude of the multitude.

This morning we arrive at Palm Sunday, and we find ourselves surrounded by huge crowds of people who are making their way to Jerusalem because it is time to celebrate the Passover. The members of the crowds and processions have traveled from near and far to reach their destination. Their travels to Jerusalem have been prompted by different motivations. They each spend time recalling stories of the past—stories some wish and pray will be reenacted, while others are as deeply committed to ensuring there will not be a repeat of historical events.

Over the past five weeks on our Lenten journey we have dwelled with the experiences of Jesus during Holy Week. Last week Pastor Lyle led us in reflecting on Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion, which we will remember on Friday of this week. We know what is coming this week, this Holy Week. We know of the rollercoaster ride of emotions. We know what to expect at the Last Supper, and in the Garden of Gethsemane. We have caught glimpses of how this story will end, and yet we are not there yet. During this season of Lent we have dwelled with the events of this week. This morning we engage in a flashback to how this week started, with Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

All four of the Gospels include Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, often referred to as the triumphal entry. This processional is one that we are familiar with as we have joined in the reenactment of it every year. Our text for today in Matthew describes again how Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem from the east. As they came to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples into the village, where he told them they would find a donkey and her colt. They find them just as he had said and bring them to Jesus. Verse 4 informs us that this took place to fulfill what was spoken through the Old Testament prophet Zechariah.

In the book of Zechariah we read of a new vision for the future when a royal figure in the line of David will come and the result will be “a world newly ordered, recreated, by God’s initiative.”ⁱ However, within that same prophetic vision Zechariah see this future “as fraught with conflict, suffering, and death.”ⁱⁱ Perhaps that is why one biblical scholar notes that for this reason “Zechariah figures prominently in the New Testament’s passion narratives.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I think that it would have been beneficial if the gospel writer had included more of the quote from Zechariah as a way to articulate the full vision of how this new king will function. In this passage in Zechariah, chapter 9, the prophet continues on to describe that this new king will

proclaim peace to the nations as God removes the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem.

Much has been written about the significance that Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey instead of a majestic horse. As Walter Bruggemann notes, “Jesus identifies himself as the Lord, but one that will ride on a donkey, a creature not normally associated with what it means to be king. Victors in battle do not ride into their capital cities riding on donkeys, but rather they ride on fearsome horses. But this king does not and will not triumph through force of arms.”^{iv} Jesus arrives to Jerusalem without a sword and without being surrounded by soldiers to protect him. Instead he arrives, living out his teachings on nonviolence and nonresistance.

I think it is imperative that we stop and allow ourselves to be reminded that members of the crowd surrounding Jesus have traveled, some a great distance, to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, that central, life-altering, foundational event when God delivered God’s people from the oppressive hand of Pharaoh in Egypt. They come to celebrate that one event, yes, but we must recognize that for the Jewish people the Exodus experience had become the pattern of deliverance. Throughout the Old Testament, people, even generations that come after the Exodus experience, continue to recount this Exodus journey as if they too were there. Bernhard Anderson highlights that

Throughout the generations Israel praised God as the Holy One who brought a band of slaves out of Egypt, formed them into a people, and gave them a future (Exodus 20:1). The Exodus is the central moment in Israel’s history, its true beginning, the time of its creation as a people. Here began the purposive movement of events that later made it possible to see all history and nature embraced within the divine design. So deeply was the Exodus etched on Israel’s memory that the maturing faith of the people was essentially a reliving and reinterpretation of this historic event.”^v “The Exodus was regarded as the clue to who God is and how God acts to deliver the downtrodden and oppressed.”^{vi}

And so this crowd has traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. And once again they find themselves being oppressed by the foreign rule of the Romans. And here comes Jesus, riding on a donkey, and they are quick to connect him with the prophecy from Zechariah. They are a people who have spent their lives retelling the miraculous story of the Exodus, the one event that informs who they are as a people and who their God is. To them Jesus is this sign of hope that their oppression might end, that freedom might finally come. And so they begin shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“Hosanna! Hosanna!” Just minutes ago we too joined in the chanting of these words. I wonder if we ever stopped to think about what these words mean. Over the years the usage and translation of *hosanna* has morphed more into a projection of praise, almost like *hallelujah*. However, *hosanna* is the Greek transliteration of a Hebrew imperative phrase meaning “save now.”^{vii} Isn’t it significant to note the original meaning of *hosanna*, especially as we dwell in this context of the impending celebration of the Passover? The crowd was yelling, “Lord, save us!”

There is such energy in crowds! I read this week that one author estimated that over 200,000 pilgrims would make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.^{viii} Imagine over 200,000

individuals gathered together, ones who believe and assert that the Exodus experience from long ago has become the paradigm for deliverance from oppression. And here they are, hoping and praying for a redeemer to come and save them from the oppressive hand of the Romans, and they see Jesus enter the city riding on a donkey. They too are mostly of the peasant class and know firsthand about poverty, abuse, and oppression, and yet they cling to hope that one day they will experience freedom and salvation.

On the east side of the city Jesus enters as the crowds yell, “Hosanna! Lord, save us!” On the west side of the city, though, there is a parallel processional as Pilate, the Roman governor, enters the city. Authors Marcus Borg and John Crossan point out how drastically different these two processions are in terms of what they consist of and the theology they represent. Jesus rode a donkey, while Pilate would have been on a majestic warhorse, demonstrating imperial power. In Pilate’s procession there would have been “cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.”^{ix}

Those surrounding Jesus had traveled to Jerusalem to retell and reenact the story of freedom from oppression, the story of the Exodus. They had traveled for days to be able to join their voices in proclaiming hope that God would send a savior to save them. Pilate and his army travel to Jerusalem for very different reasons. Pilate had chosen to live in a much nicer city located on the coast, and yet the historical records show that he went to Jerusalem for all the major Jewish festivals. As Borg and Crossan point out, Pilate did not travel all the way to Jerusalem “out of empathic reverence for the religious devotion of their Jewish subjects, but to be in the city in case there was trouble. There often was trouble, especially at Passover, a festival that celebrated the Jewish’s people’s liberation from an earlier empire.”^x Two very different parades, representing two very different theologies, two very different hopes, two very different kingdoms. One procession is the kingdom of this world that “embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world,”^{xi} while the other procession is focused on the kingdom of God—one that strives to live under the light of the teachings of Jesus the Messiah.

While are not sure what the crowds said as they observed Pilate’s parade, I think it is safe to assume that it was not as jubilant or hopeful as the crowd’s responses to Jesus riding on a donkey. And yet it appears that the crowd around Jesus didn’t understand or wasn’t willing to see how Jesus was fulfilling their need and the Old Testament prophecy to be their Savior. They had different expectations of how Jesus would save, of how freedom would come. Their blindness prohibited them from truly seeing Jesus.

Have you ever found yourself at the point of desperation and cry out to God, “Lord, save me!” and even as you say the words you have in your mind how you think God should come to your rescue? Or we reach the point of desperation and we call out to God and if God choses to respond in a way we do not anticipate, we are quick to say that God did not come to our aid? That God in God’s mercy and greatness did not answer our cry for help?

There is strength and power in crowds simply on the premise of the magnitude of the multitude. Well, this is not the first crowd to gather around Jesus, nor will it be the last. This week I found it startling to note the crowd surrounding Jesus just prior to his entry into Jerusalem. If you have your Bibles I invite you turn with me to Matthew 20:29. Here we find Jesus and his disciples

already en route to Jerusalem. They have been in Jericho, and as they leave, Matthew tells us that a large crowd followed Jesus. Perhaps they too were already on their way to celebrate the Pass-over. Well, two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by they shouted, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” This cry is not too different from what the crowd will shout later, “Hosanna, Lord, Son of David, save us!” But in this case Matthew tells us that the crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, and yet these two men yelled even louder, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” Well, Jesus heard these two voices in the midst of the large crowd, and he stopped and called them. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked them. I wonder how each of us would answer that question this morning? They answered, “Lord, open our eyes, we want to see!” Even though they were physically blind, they knew at a deep level who Jesus was and they could see who Jesus was in ways that those with perfect eyesight couldn’t see. And then Matthew tells us that Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes, and immediately they received their sight and followed him. They couldn’t have followed Jesus until their eyes were opened, until their sight was restored, until the light of Christ reached down and brought them out of their world of darkness.

What if the crowds that yelled “Hosanna!” had also asked Jesus to heal them of their blindness? What if we joined our voices this morning and, in addition to joyfully proclaiming “Hosanna!” we also recognized we had reached a point of desperation. And as we had reached that point of desperation we would yell above the noise of the crowd and yell for Jesus, our Lord, to come and open our eyes to be able to truly see Jesus, ourselves, our neighbors, our world? What if we asked Jesus, “Hosanna! Lord, save us! Heal us from our blindness and numbness to violence, abuse, war, empire thinking and theology, apathy, relativism, anger, addictions, pain, and oppression”? What if we cried out Jesus, “Just touch our eyes, our physical eyes, our spiritual eyes, the eyes of our souls, so that we can see you, truthfully, honestly, in life changing ways”? I believe that if that healing were to happen as we observed this triumphal entry, we would be able to get a glimpse of the agony and the pain that awaits Jesus for this Holy Week. And in seeing that glimpse I believe we would be moved to tears and to proclaim, “Hail to the Lord’s anointed! His name shall stand forever; that name is love.” It was out of his compassion and love that Jesus healed the two blind men, and it was out of compassion and love that Jesus entered Jerusalem and was obedient even unto death on the cross, and it is out of compassion and love that Jesus invites us to continue today in 2013 to cry out to him, “Hosanna, Lord, son of David, save us, heal us, and make us wholly yours.” This Palm Sunday may we be healed from our blindness so we can see Jesus and follow him.

Amen.

ⁱ Ben C. Ollenburger, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: The Book of Zechariah*, 743.

ⁱⁱ Ollenburger, 743.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ollenburger, 743.

^{iv} Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, 181.

^v Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 13-14.

^{vi} Anderson, 10.

^{vii} Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, 239.

^{viii} Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*, 18.

^{ix} Borg & Crossan, 3.

^x Borg & Crossan, 2.

^{xi} Borg & Crossan, 4-5.