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What have we witnessed in jubilant praise? “Auditions for the Healed Children’s Choir”

April 13, 2014 Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

Purpose: To inspire the congregation to name and accept the healing offered through Jesus, and then to join the healed children’s choir in singing jubilant praise to Jesus.

In our Lenten journey we have arrived at Palm Sunday, the day we remember and celebrate what has been named Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This morning we have been dwelling with, what have we witnessed in jubilant praise? My challenge this morning is for us all to consider if we will join the healed children’s choir. First though let us imagine for just a moment what it might have been like if we had been there during Jesus’ triumphal entry.

If we had been there at the triumphal entry we would have first probably noticed the size of the crowd, all making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover... there would have been thousands upon thousands of people. The crowd would have been unbelievable. Everywhere we would have looked we would have seen people, and more people, all making their pilgrimage to the Temple. Some would have literally been walking for days. We would have smelled a variety of fragrances. We would have smelled people who have not had an opportunity to bathe for a while. We would have smelled dust, lots of dust. We would have smelled animals. We would have heard talking, laughter, a baby’s cries, the shuffling of feet, the labored breathing of those struggling with the physical journey. We would have seen determination in the faces of those surrounding us - determination to make the journey, determination to celebrate Passover. We would have also seen weariness from the long journey, and weariness from the long journey of life. In most I think we would have seen hope - hope that they too will soon experience the release from bondage just as they are celebrating the Exodus and release from bondage their ancestors experienced.

And now though we see the man they call Jesus sitting on a donkey, and suddenly the whole demeanor of the crowd changes. Suddenly the hope that seemed so far off is brought near, and there is a new energy amidst the crowd, a new sense of hope, and excitement. People are quickly throwing off their cloaks to the road to make a path for Jesus. People are reaching up and breaking off branches and waving them and putting them down on the path. We can see all this happening, we can feel the hope and excitement, and we can hear their proclamations! They are shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” The shouting becomes more frantic and louder... the branches are rapidly flying through the air, and voices are raised beyond shouting as they proclaim their hope for a Messiah. Jesus, has arrived to Jerusalem!

I invite you to turn with me to Matthew chapter twenty one as we look more intently at this text. It is interesting to note that all four of the gospels include Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, often referred to as the triumphal entry. In our text for today 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 they bring them to Jesus. Verse four informs us that this took place to fulfill what was spoken through the Old Testament prophet Zechariah.

Matthew didn’t ask me for my input, but if he had I would have suggested that there would be benefits if he would have included more from the quote from Zechariah as a way to articulate the full vision of how this new king will function. In the 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 Stanley Hauerwas notes, “Jesus identifies himself as the Lord, but one that will ride on an ass (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 asses (donkeys), but rather they ride on fearsome horses. But this king does not and will not triumph through force of arms.”ⁱ Jesus does not arrive in Jerusalem with a sword and being surrounded by soldiers to protect him. Instead Jesus arrives living out his teachings on nonviolence and nonresistance.

We as Anabaptists are committed to peace and to being peacemakers. We should not gloss over nor forget that Jesus, the one we are called to emulate, made his grand entrance on the back of donkey. During this same time on the west side of the city though would have been a parallel processional as Pilate, the Roman Governor, enters the city. Jesus rode a donkey while Pilate would have been on a majestic war-horse demonstrating imperial power. This week I wondered, where in our lives and where in our church are we trying to put Jesus up on a war horse? Where in our life together are we trying to change who Jesus came to be so that he would better fit the agenda we need him to fulfill; agenda we feel would be better achieved on the back of a majestic war horse? Where are we forgetting the truth that he arrived as a humble king on the back of a donkey?

We are told in verse nine that the after those in the crowd have spread out their garments on the road, and taken down branches and paved the way, that they began to shout “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” We need to be reminded that they were being oppressed by the foreign rule of the Romans, and it under that oppression that they see that 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 informs 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’ is the Greek transliteration of a Hebrew imperative phrase meaning “save now,”ⁱⁱ so it could be understood that the crowd was all joining together shouting – “Lord, save us!”

The crowd had made the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, to remember the Exodus, and now they were in desperate need of a Messiah, of redemption. And yet they do not fully understand who it is that is riding on the back of the donkey. Sure they have hopes and dreams of the kingdom they want Jesus to usher in, and in fact they have an idea or two of how he should usher in that kingdom, but do you think they really understood who Jesus was? In verse ten we are told that Jesus entered Jerusalem and it was asked, “Who is this?” If the crowds really understood, if they really were embracing Jesus’ mission on earth, how do you think they would have responded to that question? The crowds’ answer was, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” I don’t know about you, but something about their answer leads me to question the authenticity of their hosannas. Hmmm, I wonder, how would we answer the town’s question and how would our answers reflect back the authenticity or the superficiality of our own hosannas?

This week as I sat with this text what really struck me actually came from looking at the two stories surrounding this text. Specifically it was noting that Jesus’ triumphal entry in Matthew is bracketed by two healing narratives. Moreover these two healing narratives included an unlikely group of people who seemed to be able to see who Jesus truly was, who he came to

be, and then worshiped him as the king of all who arrived riding on the back of a donkey. Isn't it interesting to ponder this considering as the crowds following Jesus were crying out to be saved from something?

Turn with me to chapter twenty beginning in verse twenty-nine. Here we find Jesus and his disciples already in route to Jerusalem. They have been in Jericho and as they are leaving Jericho Matthew tells us that a large crowd followed Jesus, perhaps they too were already on their way to celebrate the Passover. 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 to the Son of David, save us!" But in this case Matthew tells us that the crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet. This makes my head and heart hurt. It makes me ask a question I would probably rather not ask myself because it has potential to make me feel uncomfortable. Who am I blocking from coming to the feet of Jesus? Yet these men would not be deterred and they 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. Think for just a moment. It was a huge crowd – remember the smells, the sights, the noises? And even in the midst of Jesus hears them, stops, and then calls to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" 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. They could not 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. The text tells us that they immediately followed him; they joined the healed children's choir. Interesting, it doesn't appear that they had to audition for their roles?

Now turn with me to chapter twenty-one verse twelve. I am curious to know, if I would have asked you to make a list of the healing narratives in Matthew, would you have thought to include Jesus cleansing the temple in that list? I must be honest and tell you that before my study this week I am not sure that I would have thought to include this passage in a list of healing narratives, and yet that is exactly what it is.

Jesus has entered Jerusalem and he goes immediately to the temple. We are told in verse twelve "Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers." Now before go further, what exactly was happening in the temple that day? Well the activity was happening in the outer courts, the only part of the Temple where the Gentiles were allowed. First there were people selling animals to be used for sacrifice. While that was permitted, these people were selling the animals at a high price, and therefore cheating the buyers. The poor were permitted to offer less expensive pigeons or doves instead of the larger more expensive animals, but yet the religious establishment was overcharging for the doves – those specifically available for the poor! Furthermore the religious establishment had to certify if the animals people brought in to sacrifice were 'clean.' They were rejecting 'clean' animals so that those people had to buy their animals at an exorbitant price!

Plus there was exchanging of money, which the religious establishment required, but they had also set a high exchange rate. And then there were those who were simply carrying merchandise through the temple courts because it was the shortest route from the Kidron Valley

into Jerusalem. They were not thinking about worship or God. They simply wanted the shortest and easiest route, and that took them right through the temple courts. Not only was there cheating and robbing financially, but by setting up in the outer courts they were robbing the Gentiles of their place of worship and prayer.

Who can pray in a place which was at once a cattle-market and an exchange, where the flapping of wings of the doves is combined with the clanging sounds of money? We may imagine animals running free, birds flapping wildly to escape, coins rolling all over the ground, and people running around or fleeing in astonishment and confusion.

Jesus explains his actions by quoting from Jeremiah chapter seven that his house has been turned into a den of robbers. The temple has not become what it should be! One might make the argument that entire temple system needed to be healed. Timothy Geddert helps us understand by explaining that “A robber’s den is the place where robbers retreat for safety. It typically is a cave in the mountains where robbers set up their stronghold, plot further crimes, and guard their loot. It is a place where they think they can escape justice”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus says though that his house is to be a house of prayer where his followers are called to pray for and act for justice for all.

Once again Jesus lives out his own theology as the passage continues in verse fourteen. “The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.” Whoa! If we turned back to Leviticus or Second Samuel we would be reminded of how the blind and the lame were not permitted in the temple, nor were they permitted to offer sacrifices. Yet, here they were in the temple and Jesus did not rebuke them, did not send them away, did not call for the religious authorities to come and have them removed. Instead we are told that Jesus did what? He healed them. In the temple. Who or what was healed? The people or the temple? Or both? Jesus lives into his own theology that the good news of the gospel is in fact for all people. This humble king

who arrived riding on the donkey is full of compassion and mercy for all. If Jesus stopped there it would have been enough, but no the text continues in verse fifteen.

“But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.” Whoa! Did Matthew just say that there were children shouting in the temple courts? Wait a minute! Like the blind and lame the children were not permitted in the temple! Can’t you just imagine the confusion and chaos of the religious leaders as they watch Jesus breaking up the system they had dutifully created, and then he is welcoming and healing the lame and blind in the temple? And now there are even children in the temple, and they are enthusiastically shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Friends, it is the healed children’s choir debut in the temple!

Here we are on Palm Sunday, and we are reminded that Jesus had his triumphal entry on the back of the donkey. The stories surrounding our text also reveal additional characteristics of our Messiah, and of the kingdom he came to usher in. On this Palm Sunday I invite us all to strive to understand who Jesus is and strive to better understand the kingdom he continues to desire to usher in. Then, as ones who too have experienced the healing and wholeness that can only come through Jesus, and as ones that are living into a kingdom that centers on elements such as justice, peacemaking, discipleship, and compassion, may we freely join with those who have been healed – the blind, the lame, the children - and raise our voices as part of the healed children’s choir that is singing with jubilant praise, “Hosanna, blessed is he who is coming in the name of the Lord!”

Now here is where perhaps we say hallelujah, because unlike American Idol, America’s Got Talent, The Voice, or any show like that, we do not need to audition. Our singing is not a

performance, it is worship. So instead of auditioning we sing, we freely sing, we sing with jubilant praise to the one that has set us free, the one that has brought down the structures that bind us and others, the structures that prevent us or others from coming close. Jesus opens wide his arms and says with jubilant joy and abundant mercy – come, all who are lame and blind and I will give you healing from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, come you who are poor in life or poor in spirit and I will make your life embrace the riches of the kingdom, come to me the children those set aside from society as unwanted, unlovely, unlovable, and I will hold you close to my chest and whisper tender words of love and acceptance. Come, allow me to speak into your lives, to speak into your religious structures and institutions, to gather you close, to transform, to heal, to redeem. And then my children... join the healed children's choir and sing.

On this Palm Sunday may we sing but may we not sing with superficial hosannas like those on the first triumphant entry. Instead let us sing with heartfelt hosannas from ones who have glimpsed the majesty, the miracle, the meekness, the mystery of this man called Jesus. Come on this Palm Sunday, join the healed children's choir and sing.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 181.

ⁱⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993), 239.

ⁱⁱⁱ Timothy J. Geddert, *Believers Church Biblical Commentary: Mark* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2001), 267.