Palm and Passion

Matthew 21:1-11 Kimby Young

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Palm Sunday is fun. We get to act out a parade. We get to anticipate Easter. We kick off a week of high drama and expectation. With Palm Sunday, we begin the reenactment of the last week of Jesus’ life. We watch children waving palms and shouting. And if we are lucky and brave enough, we shout and wave and sing hallelujah as well. We praise God as fully and as joyfully as children, if we’re lucky. We imagine what it would have been like to see Jesus enter Jerusalem. We celebrate our king Jesus. And we remember how Jesus came to save us. Palm Sunday is fun.

But between this week and next, a lot happens as we remember the life of Jesus – and it’s not so fun. Maundy Thursday – the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. Good Friday – Jesus’ brutal torture and death on a cross. Holy Saturday – the long day of waiting in the unknown. It’s a powerful week. It’s a week full of meaning and passion. We call it “The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Passion. Webster defines passion as “strong and barely controllable emotion.” That’s what this Holy Week is about – strong and barely controllable emotion.

We talked earlier during the children’s time about the excitement of meeting Jesus – the power of that emotional crowd. I don’t know if you have ever been in a crowd like that. Maybe a parade. Maybe a concert or sporting event. Maybe a political rally. Maybe seeing some popular star.

One time, thirty five years ago, I had the chance to experience an audience with the Pope in Rome – just me and 5000 of my closest friends. On a group tour in college, that was one of the events booked for us. I thought – oh well, ok. I’m not Catholic. It’ll be interesting. But as we gathered and waited, the powerful emotion in the crowd was palpable. There was an energy, an excitement - I would say, even a Spirit in the place. As the time for the pope’s arrival drew nearer and nearer, the anticipation mounted. Finally, something changed and the energy turned to the back of the room. Word passed thru the crowd – the Pope had entered and was walking slowly down the aisle touching any who reached for him. I was near the aisle – maybe 20 feet, and I helped my Catholic friends crawl over people to get to the barrier. As the Pope drew nearer and then passed and moved on. I couldn’t help thinking – and this is just Jesus’ representative for the church. Imagine if Jesus were walking so close to us. Imagine what it would feel like to be that close to Jesus, to be touched by Jesus, to see Jesus. Imagine the energy of the crowd. Imagine the power of the Spirit. Imagine the presence of God with us – right here with us.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, most people in the crowd didn’t know what was happening. They welcomed a teacher, a leader. They cheered for a hero, a star, a famous person. Maybe some had heard Jesus teach – and they recognized his wisdom and authority. Maybe some had witnessed one of his miracles – and they felt the presence of God with him, in him. Maybe they anticipated the actions of a long awaited Messiah - a revolution, an overthrow of an oppressive government. Maybe they just were excited to be in Jerusalem for a big holiday week. But none of them, NONE of them, even those closest to Jesus, none of them knew what would happen in the week ahead. None of them anticipated an arrest, a cross, a death, a resurrection. None of them understood just how Jesus would save them… and save all of us.

But we know. We know what it meant for Jesus to enter Jerusalem. We know that Jesus knew what was about to happen – and it wasn’t anything like the crowd anticipated. Jesus knew he was about to die. Jesus knew that by entering Jerusalem he was entering the final week of his life on earth. Jesus knew that the week ahead would be painful, torturously painful, and not only because of the cross – but also because of the betrayal. Jesus knew also that his followers would face fear and doubt and horror in the days ahead. And he didn’t want that for them. Jesus knew.

So as the crowd cheered and screamed and sang around him – Hosanna, Hallelujah, Save us! As the crowd laughed and ran along and gathered steam – imagine Jesus’ thoughts. This same crowd – or some of this same crowd – would shout “Crucify Him!” in just a few days. This same crowd would run away in fear. This same crowd would hide and pretend not to know Jesus. This same crowd would lose faith and would be overcome with doubt. Don’t you know it broke Jesus’ heart? Don’t you know as they laughed and sang, Jesus felt much deeper emotions? Don’t you know Jesus wanted to tell them what was coming, to teach them a little bit more, to reach them, to get them ready for the passion that followed? The passion - the strong and barely controllable emotion.

We know what the week ahead will bring. So when we shout or sing “Hosanna, Save us,” we know what that means. We know that Jesus saved us, by facing darkness head on. Jesus saved us, by taking on our sins and carrying them for us. Jesus saved us, by submitting to torture and death. But even in that death, transforming death so that it no longer has power over us. Jesus saved us, and saves us, by bringing the power of God to human life, by offering us that very power of God. Jesus saved us, and saves us, by turning that darkness and fear and sin and death into light and hope and grace and new life. Jesus turned everything upside down. And Jesus does that again and again in our lives – reminding us that nothing has as much power as God’s love, and nothing can separate us from that love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So today, as we sing, “Hosanna, Save us,” we know what God has done for us. We sing it differently than that crowd on that first morning so long ago. Perhaps we sing it with tears in our eyes. Perhaps our laughter is just a little bit deeper. Because we know what Jesus did. We know the grace of God for us, and how that grace can transform our lives and our world.

We know the cost of salvation, the cost of the cross, the cost of grace. And we know that cost has been paid for us, so we don’t have to die or struggle or suffer or be afraid. We have hope in Jesus Christ. We have reason to rejoice and celebrate and wave palms and sing songs. We have reason to believe and live our faith. We know the power of “Hosanna, Save us.” We know the gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. We know.

Remember. This week as you go out in to the world. Remember God’s love as shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remember. And give to God your thanks and praise. Hosanna. Hallelujah. Amen.