

“Loud Praises”

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, March 20, 2016
Palm Sunday**

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 118:19-29 and Luke 19:28-40

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 118:19-29

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Luke 19:28-40

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard from sacred scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord and let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. Amen.

One of the conundrums of being a preacher is messing with everyone's expectations and special, holy days. Children lining up with palm branches waving, the story of Jesus riding into town on a donkey, people shouting "Hosanna" over and over again and then there is the gospel story in Luke that does not have a donkey, it does not have children, it does not have palm fronds and it does not even have a "Hosanna". Kind of like waking up on the first day of spring and seeing the snow falling. Get kinda used to paradox every now and then--the space between what we expect to be happening and what actually is happening sometimes is a place of invitation for us. A place to see Jesus at work in different ways than what we expect. I don't about the weather, but I'm convinced that somewhere between the image that we have of the conquering hero riding into town on a donkey with children waving palm fronds and the story that we have of Jesus riding a colt with not a child in sight, that somewhere in that space between these two stories is something of gospel importance. We realize that what we want and hope and dream about at times does not come true. Instead we are invited to look with eyes of faith to see the real presence of Christ portrayed before us.

On a couple Thursday mornings throughout the year I teach a book group called "Flunking Sainthood". It's a group of people that gather together to go through a book of that title. We consider different spiritual disciplines, try them out for a couple of weeks and then get back together and share our successes but more frequently our failures. Things like fasting, constant prayer, being kind to everyone we meet, on and on they go. It was in the midst of one of these classes that a participant, and ex-nun, shared a story. Her job in the convent that she was a part of here in the area was to take all of the linens that are used in worship to the convent up in Clayton to have them laundered--that's one of the ministries that they do. She shared the story of going to this special service door that you walk into and there is a buzzer on the wall and in the wall is a giant turnstile, half outside and half inside. You hit the buzzer and the nun behind the wall says something to you and you lay the linens on the turnstile and you turn them in to the nun, not seeing her, not touching her, but only hearing her through the wall and then the nun takes the stuff and she launders it. I was thinking about the sense of distance and space and how some people who are Christians believe they need to live their lives in such a way that they are unspoiled or uncontaminated by modern life or daily living. That the cloistered nun behind the wall somehow felt that if she got too close to a regular, ordinary person, maybe bad things would happen to her.

In the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt, what I've come to realize is that he was willing to not be cloistered and away and set apart and protected, but instead was willing to become our contaminated savior. The story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a colt says that Jesus has the willingness to ride into the situations in our lives as they are. Rather than being exalted and lifted up, Jesus is first present and real in our ordinary daily rhythms. The question is, in the paradox between our wanting someone high and lifted up versus someone present, do we have the eyes of those in the crowd who can see and recognize that presence of Christ before us? I call this the paradox, really, of Easter. But here it's the paradox of Palm Sunday. The story that is familiar is being challenged by the reality that is before us, and again I'm convinced that in that space, gospel happens. How many times do we hear if we only prayed harder or tried harder then things would work out better for us? The story of Jesus riding a colt is...no, things may not work out better, but Christ is present. Christ is available. Christ is there in our midst.

Last week I talked a bit about obituary writing. This week as I consider the week that we celebrate together, the beginning first steps here of Jesus entering into Jerusalem and then the last supper with his friends, the accusations and handing him over to be crucified, the crucifixion, itself, placing him in the tomb and waiting for the good news on Sunday. I realize that there is a theme to this time and it's a theme that we, as Christians, need not be afraid of and run too quickly to the triumphal aspects of the Easter story. Palm Sunday and all of Holy Week teaches us that Christ is present in the hard and real places of our lives.

I don't know how the Holy Spirit does it, but every now and then she hands me these great stories that fit beautifully for a given Sunday. This week I was reading some stuff online and stumbled across an article that was in the New York Times Sunday Review. The author is a young woman named Kate Bowler. She is the Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity in North America at Duke Divinity School. She is a young academic and her first book that she published was called Blessed. It's a history of the American Prosperity Gospel. In the story she talks about all the churches she visited where she heard that if you are suffering you just need to pray harder. If you're having financial trouble you just need to get right with God. If you're having a situation with your children that isn't quite right, you just need to get on your knees and try a little bit harder and pray a little bit longer and then everything will work out and God will bless you. Again the title of her first book is called Blessed.

And then at 35 she learns that she has stage IV cancer. The pain in her stomach that she thought was a gallbladder turned out to be a tumor, and now she is sitting somewhere between the irony of the reality of her life and book that she wrote called Blessed. She is starting to ask herself different questions about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The dream that she had of a life that she was going to live was now stripped away. Instead she is confronting reality and trying to find that presence in the midst of real life. She tells the story of a prosperity gospel-oriented neighbor who comes over one evening, knocks on her door, her husband answers and the woman says to her husband, "You know, with the Lord, everything happens for a reason." And her husband responds enthusiastically, "Oh, I'd love to hear it." "What?" says the neighbor. "I'd love to hear the reason that my wife is dying." And then the husband simply shuts the door.

In this season of Palm Sunday at the beginning of the holiest and most sacred week in our Christian tradition, we need not be afraid of the hard realities of life. We need not be afraid of the struggles, the diagnosis, the fear, the terror or whatever else is plaguing us, because Christ has walked this journey with us. The challenge that we have is to not gloss over the hard aspects of life, but instead to stop long enough, like the crowd on the street, and see with new eyes the presence of Christ in our midst. The humble Christ, riding a colt, not a white stallion. Being recognized not by everyone but a few. The one who is going to take all of our suffering and sin upon himself and be willing to be nailed to a cross not too many days from now.

Today we shout hosannas and sing them in anticipation of what is to come. But let us not forget that we need to not be afraid now. We can celebrate what is coming, but let us honor the road that our Lord trod as well. Amen.