

Pastor Jim's Sermon
"Palms and Pandemics"
April 5, 2020
Matthew 21:1-11

Has Jesus saved you? How did he do it? What did he save you from? Or are you still waiting to be saved? Did he save you from everything you thought he would?

Today's reading is all about salvation. We began worship by shouting "Hosanna!" It's the word the crowd uses to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. It's a Hebrew word that comes from Psalm 118 and it means something like "save now!" In the ancient world it became the expression of praise for the messiah. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

To understand this passage better, we first have to talk about something called "messianic expectations." For a long time Israel had been under the thumb of various conquering empires: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. In the years leading up to Jesus' ministry, many began to hope for the arrival of a messiah, a new king of Israel appointed by God. Many held grand expectations of this coming savior. He would be a triumphant king, a conquering warrior, a holy priest; most of all, he would overthrow the empires that had crushed Israel and lead Israel back into glory.

In the midst of these expectations, Jesus spends a long time traveling around Capernaum preaching and teaching and healing, and his reputation spreads. People start talking about this Jesus guy and some begin to wonder if perhaps *he* is the messiah. Word gets out that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem and a crowd starts to gather.

Back in those days, kings, returning from conquest, often made triumphant entries, riding on warhorses, fresh from military victory. People would spread branches and cloaks out on the road so that even the king's horse would not have to tread on the dirty ground. Crowds would cheer for this victorious ruler, proclaiming his power and glory and might.

This sounds a lot like the reception that Jesus receives.

Jesus' reputation precedes him and so when he approaches Jerusalem riding on a donkey, people eat it up. They've heard rumors of this Rabbi who works miracles, challenges religious authorities, and even goes toe-to-toe with Rome. Maybe *he is* the new messiah who will overthrow Rome and lead Israel back into glory. So the crowd throws cloaks and waves palm branches and shouts, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" which basically means, "Save us, O new king of Israel!"

You can start to see why the religious leaders might accuse Jesus of heresy, and why the Roman Empire might want to execute Jesus for treason.

But the crowd misses some important details. Matthew has spent his whole gospel creating an image of Jesus that does not really line up with common messianic expectations. Jesus has taught the crowds to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile; he has supped with sinners, touched lepers, communed with tax collectors, and favored Samaritans. Matthew's depiction of Jesus is far from a conquering warrior king.

What's more, Jesus enters Jerusalem not on a warhorse, but a donkey, echoing the words of the prophet Zechariah. Whereas warhorses symbolized...well, war—Donkeys were a symbol of peace. Jesus's arrival on a donkey symbolizes that he has come to Jerusalem not to overthrow Rome, not for war, but for peace. What's more, Zechariah says that the king will enter humbly, and Jesus is a paragon of humility. Jesus is not the messiah the crowds expected.

I find it astounding that this crowd shouts "Hosanna" one day, and then "Crucify him!" just five days later. Public perception of Jesus changes quickly and dramatically because Jesus fails to live up to people's expectations of who the messiah *should* be. The crowds betray Jesus because they themselves feel betrayed by him. He was supposed to be the one who saved them, but instead he seems to do nothing at all. Who wouldn't be disappointed?

If I'm honest, I always feel a bit uncomfortable with the celebration of Palm Sunday. It is, of course, good to offer Jesus praise and celebrate him as messiah, but behind this whole story lies betrayal; the crowd that shouts Hosanna, the crowd that waves palms, the crowd that throws cloaks on the road quickly becomes the crowd that shouts for Jesus to be crucified. Every year we reenact this scene, and every year we put ourselves in the place the crowd.

But maybe that's the point. We can be fickle, can't we? Like the crowd we can praise God as our savior one moment and then turn around and abandon God when God doesn't save us the way we had expected. We can scoff at the crowd for being so fickle, but at the end of the day, we're just like the crowd.

So as we enter into this Holy Week, I have to wonder: what are *our* messianic expectations? How exactly do *we* expect God to save *us*?

In signature dramatic flair, a popular television preacher recently declared coronavirus defeated by the power of Jesus' name. Yet despite his loud praying, cases of coronavirus have climbed over 200,000 in this country, a number that only increases. That preacher might say coronavirus persists due to a lack of faithfulness, but I know a whole lot of faithful people crying out to God for salvation from this pandemic and yet none has come.

The people in the crowd expected Jesus to save them from Rome and were sorely disappointed when he didn't. Similarly, many have prayed that God would put a swift end to this current pandemic and yet God hasn't. It was long hoped that the messiah would come and topple all the tyrannical governments of the world and bring a new era of peace. It's not a stretch to hope that the messiah could put an end to the tyranny of global pandemics as well. But oppressive regimes still reign in the world and pandemics still spread.

It's no wonder people were disappointed two thousand years ago, and it's no wonder they're disappointed now. If God is so powerful, why do these evils still exist?

We say that Jesus came to save the world, but what does that mean? Often we think like the crowd, believing that Jesus will deliver us from all kinds of evils in this life, like war, poverty, or pandemic. God works in mysterious ways and I'm not saying that God can't save us from that stuff, but I think the experiences of a great many people show us that God doesn't always save us from that stuff. A great many plagues have swept across this world without relief. I don't know why, and we may never get an answer to that question this side of eternity.

There is so much we expect God to save us from, but maybe our expectations are misplaced. When Jesus came to save the world, he had a different purpose in mind. He wasn't interested in going after Rome; his target was a whole lot bigger. All the oppressive governments and global pandemics are orchestrated by one great and cruel empire—the empire of death. And it is *that* empire which Jesus sought to destroy.

Throughout Holy Week we walk with Jesus to the cross. Jesus' death may not have overthrown Rome; it may not have made Israel into a glorious nation; it may not have put an end to pandemics; but Jesus' death on a cross *did* topple the empire of *death* forever. While evil still roams this troubled world, it has lost all of its final power.

You see, the powers of death no longer define us. Our identity is not in oppression or sickness or suffering or shame or addiction; our identity is in Jesus. We are resurrection people and we live in the hope of the resurrection to come. We live knowing that though we may die, yet shall we live. And so by God's grace we can live as though the resurrection were already here; we can live knowing that eternal life is ours. And so we have nothing to fear. The empires of this world have no power over us because in Jesus, death has died; in Jesus, there is life.

And so as we begin this Holy Week, I invite you to leave your palm branch in the dirt; it never meant that much anyway. Instead, let us take up the cross and walk with Jesus from death into life.

Amen.