

Who Will Save Us? A Message for Palm Sunday
Presented to Trinity Evangelical Free Church of Teaneck, NJ
On Sunday, April 5, 2020
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Introduction

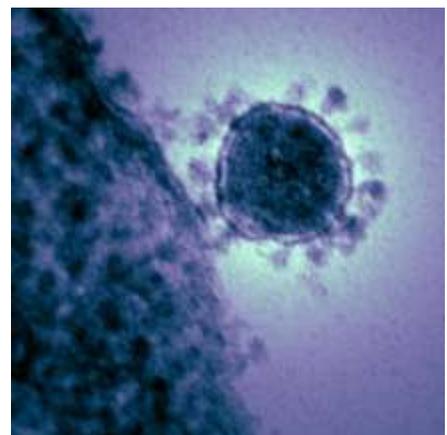


There's an old song entitled, "I Love a Parade". It's one of those songs where lots of people have heard the title, but just about no one knows the words. Let's have a little fun and listen to a few of those words:

I walk every step o' the mile,
And think it was really worthwhile
To see a parade come marching down the line.
I don't know a son of a gun
Who wouldn't be willing to run
To see a parade come marching down the line
(“I Love a Parade”, 1931 Music: Harold Arlen / Lyrics: Ted Koehler)

The song was written in the days before television, before people enjoyed all the entertainment options we have today. Today, we hear music playing somewhere and don't think much of it. Back in those days, if you heard music of in the distance, it meant there was a band. People would come running from all over. Where there was a band, there was a crowd.

We miss crowds nowadays. We're in the midst of a pandemic, so we're all told we need to stay at home. If you're found in a group of more than four people, you might get a challenge from the authorities. Major sports events have been cancelled. Those athletes who are still allowed to compete do so before empty stadiums. Movies, Concerts, restaurants, and even gathering at the local coffee shop are all off-limits. Anything involving a crowd is thought to be dangerous.



Just a few days ago was April first, also known as “April Fool’s Day.” When I was in elementary school, we might run up to someone on that day and say, “Hey, you have a purple spider with yellow polka dots on your back.” Then, we’d yell out, “April Fools!”. That’s what April Fool’s day is all about. You make up things that are really crazy and highly improbable, hoping someone will believe you. Imagine at any other time that someone tried to make up an April Fool’s gag saying that people all over the world would be locked in their homes and afraid to go out. I wish we could all look at the headlines in the papers and just say, “April fools”. But, we can’t.

Worse, with all public meetings prohibited, churches are closed all over the world. In the early days of the church, the first few centuries after the time of Christ, Christians were persecuted. So, they often held services in small groups in people’s homes in secret. Then, in the year 313 A.D., the Emperor Constantine created something called, “The Edict of Milan”. It was a proclamation making Christianity legal for the entire Roman Empire. In the centuries since that proclamation, there has never been a time when churches as a whole were prevented from celebrating Palm Sunday and Easter in public. But here we are.

Yes, we’re living in very troubling times, but God is in control.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Maybe the fact that we miss the crowds will help us today. We’re going to be looking at an event that occurred almost 2000 years ago. It was a parade. This parade drew quite a crowd. It took place in the ancient city of Jerusalem. Maybe the fact that we miss the crowds will help us to better understand the crowd we’ll be visiting today as we look at that parade that took place so long ago.

Let’s read about it. Let’s read about the first Palm Sunday.

12 The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 13 They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,
“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the king of Israel!”

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

15 “Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey’s colt.”

(John 12:12-15 (NIV))

Imagine the scene: We’re told there’s a festival. This festival surrounded the Jewish celebration of Passover. Centuries before, the Hebrew people lived in bondage, slaves in the land of Egypt.

One day, their God sent a man to save them: Moses. Through Moses, the God of the Hebrew people showed awesome power that allowed them to leave their bondage and live in freedom.

So, centuries later the Jewish people still celebrated this event. Who doesn't like a celebration? Jerusalem was the center of the celebration, so the city was very crowded.

There were lots of people visiting Jerusalem. Some were looking for the religious significance of the event. Others just liked the celebration. There was music. There were parties. Where there are lots of people, there are usually merchants very happy to sell food and supplies, and maybe even souvenirs to the visitors.

Suddenly, word gets out: There is a man named Jesus of Nazareth. And he's coming into town. Many believe that Jesus is a great prophet. So, they run to see him. When they saw Jesus, a visit turned into a parade. The crowds lined the road as Jesus went by. Then the people in the crowd did something very special:

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the king of Israel!” (John 12:13)

Why would they do that? Let's find out by looking at what they said.

First, they shouted the word, “Hosanna”. It's a word that means, “Save us”. Many people in Israel in those days believed that they needed to be saved. They had been invaded by the Romans. The Romans could be cruel - People were very afraid of them. They were oppressive in many ways, and the Hebrew people wanted them out.

Every now and then, someone would come along and attempt a revolt. Up to this time, the revolts were easily crushed by the might of Roman armies. Anyone participating in a revolt could be punished by crucifixion. Crucifixion wasn't invented by the Romans just for Jesus. It was a standard tool for troublemakers. Troublemakers were to be made an example. So, it wasn't unusual for people around Israel to see men nailed to crosses by the road.

The Hebrew people had come to know that, if someone were to successfully revolt against the romans, it would have to be someone very special: Someone sent from and empowered by God. They had long waited for a very special man who could do this. Their prophets had announced the Messiah, the anointed one, the Great King.

When they looked at Jesus, they believed this great king had come. This was the man, who, like Moses, would lead them to freedom. And so, they shouted out, ““Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!”

Now, here's something important. When the Hebrew people worshipped, they used a collection of songs that we today call "The book of Psalms". That's right – The book of Psalms is a hymnal. The Psalms were all set to music. A very popular one was Psalm 118. Here are some of the words from that Psalm:

25 Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.
27 The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar. (Psalm 118:25-27)

So, the crowds believed that Jesus would save them. He came in the name of the Lord, so he would save them through the power of God. They believed that he was the great King. And so, the residents of Jerusalem remembered a song that they often sang in worship. A song that said, "grab a branch from a tree and be ready to wave it. Join in the procession."

Here's where the story takes a twist. There were some things that the people of Jerusalem got right about Jesus. Yes, he was their Savior. Yes, he did come in the name of the Lord. He was a great prophet of great power. And yes, he was the great King, the Messiah.

But there were some things that the crowds got wrong. Let's read again from John 12.

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:
15 "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey's colt." (John 12:14-15)

This must have seemed odd to many. A savior capable of throwing off the Romans should have been a great warrior. He should have ridden in on a beautiful horse. Or, maybe he should have driven a chariot?

But no, this Savior was different. One of the reasons we believe that Jesus was the great King, the Messiah, was that he fulfilled many prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures. He's doing that here. The writer, the Apostle John, quotes the prophet Zechariah.

9 Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

So, Jesus fulfilled that prophecy. Instead of a horse, he rode in on a donkey. But what's more important is why. Let's read more:

10 I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth .
(Zechariah 9:9-10)

This King, this Savior, was going to be like no other. Someday, he would rule to the ends of the earth. Yes, he would be victorious, but not because of the strength of horses and chariots. He would have no need for those things. Horses were for the powerful, the wealthy, the elite. This king came on a donkey. Zechariah says this is a "lowly" way to enter the city.

The donkey is an animal for the common people, for the workers. Most kings would come and expect to be served. This king was coming to serve others. *He was coming to get to work.*

This king wasn't coming to start a war. He was coming to make an offer of peace. His power wouldn't come from weapons like chariots. It would come from something else.

This is where the story takes a second twist.

The psalm we read earlier, Psalm 118, says that there would be a procession, a parade. The people thought that maybe, they were marching to a palace. Their king would surely ride up to a throne. But, this procession didn't go straight to the throne. It was going somewhere else.

Let's read a sentence from Psalm 118 again.

The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar (emphasis mine).
(Psalm 118:27)

This procession didn't lead to a palace and a throne. It led to an altar.

Altars are where you make a sacrifice. That sacrifice can be something you've worked hard for, like grain. It can be poured out on the altar as an offering to God, never to be seen on this earth again.

Or, the sacrifice can be a living thing. It can be an animal slaughtered as a sacrifice for sin.

Yes, the great King, the Messiah had come. But his power wasn't in weapons. One day, he would sit on a throne. But the path from Palm Sunday to that throne wasn't a military revolution. The path didn't come from a demand that people serve their King. The path was through service to others. The path was through a sacrifice for sin.

Jesus would later say, "...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (John 20:28) The path to the throne was across an altar, with the great King himself being offered as the sacrifice for sin.

Centuries later, we still remember Palm Sunday. It generally starts a week of remembrances leading up to Easter. It's a bittersweet event.

On the one hand, we're given a picture of what heaven will look like someday. There will be joyful people, lots of them (yes, crowds) in a state of constant celebration. All creation will celebrate Jesus Christ on his throne. So, we come to church. It's not unusual to see palm branches handed out. We don't sing, "I love a parade" - We have better songs for joyful worship. But the main point is: We remember the positive side of that great event.

But, having a positive side means there's a negative side. Only a few days after Jesus was cheered in a spontaneous parade, the crowds dispersed. As we said, the crowds missed some important parts of this man Jesus and his work. They understood correctly that Jesus was a Savior and the Great King. But, they thought that meant he'd immediately whip out a sword and lead the revolution against Rome. Instead, he was arrested. When the crowds saw this, they turned on Jesus.

Some participated in the mobs that called for Jesus to be crucified. How tragic! There may have been some in the crowd who one day shouted "Hosanna", that only a few days later shouted "crucify".

This crowd failed to understand that Jesus, the man who came in the name of the Lord, was doing exactly what God sent him to do. The greatest enemy of the Hebrew people wasn't Rome. The greatest enemy of the Hebrew people, and all people, is sin and death.

Fortunately for all of us, God is bigger than any crowd. No collection of humans, no matter how large, can thwart the plans of God. When Jesus was nailed to that cross, God transformed it into an altar. There on the Cross, on that altar, Jesus was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

The story could end there. We could sing a hymn, and all go home, carrying our palm branches with us. But today, on Sunday April 4, 2020, Palm Sunday, we have an incredible and rare opportunity.

In many ways, the first Palm Sunday, early in the first century A.D., was really not much different than today. In those days, the people of Jerusalem were looking for a savior. Sadly,

they had some bad ideas about what their savior would look like. Because of that, in one of the most irrational and tragic events in history, they rejected their Savior when he came.

It's really the same today. All over the world, people are afraid. They're confused. They're angry. They're looking for a Savior, too. And, they have some very wrong-headed ideas about what their savior will look like.

Let's look at some situations related to our current crisis.

Early this year, we learned about the Coronavirus. It didn't take long for the world to discover how bad it was. What did people think would save them? How did people respond?

- *They went to the grocery stores and cleaned all the toilet paper off the shelves.*

Before we get too far here, I should mention that I'm old enough to remember a time when ministers didn't talk about toilet paper, or toilets for that matter, during their sermons. Talk about an April Fool's joke! Imagine that you lived 40 years ago. What if April 1st and Palm Sunday fell on the same day? Imagine someone coming up to you and saying, "It's Palm Sunday, and the minister is going to talk about toilet paper." The whole room could have yelled, "April Fool".

Well, I guess these are the benefits of living in the 21st century. So here we go.

It's been weeks now since everyone began to "shelter at home". You can still go into big grocery stores and see the entire paper aisle empty. The Grocery store near me has white shelves. You need sunglasses to do down that aisle.

And here's the best part. What does toilet paper have to do with battling the Corona virus? Absolutely nothing! We're all being bombarded with news article, videos, emails and other notifications about the virus. I haven't seen one that suggests you should stock up on TP.

I can understand why hand sanitizer went fast. I could understand products that disinfect things; sprays and wipes and all that. But toilet paper? No. That's pure, irrational fear. If everyone would have just stayed calm, there would be plenty of paper products for everyone. Sadly, a few people have garages full of the stuff.

Things get worse. Not only does hoarding paper products hurt the general population, it's dangerous. Paper is very flammable. If you have a garage full of it, and one package is sitting on an old electrical cord, your whole garage will go up in flames. If you're the one hoarding, you'd better hope the flames don't take your whole home down along with the garage.

What can save us from our crisis? Not hoarding! Hoarding a false savior. It has nothing to do with solving a serious problem. It just hurts everyone and endangers the people who do it.

So, why do people do it? *Because they're afraid.*

They believe they're in danger, and they desperately want something to make them feel safe. When you let fear get the best of you, you can become irrational. When you're irrational, it's easy to fall to illusions. Apparently, the site of a garage full of paper products makes some people feel safe. But any person who steps back and takes a deep breath knows that this is only an illusion. ***A garage full of toilet paper won't save you.***

Let's move on to another one. Here are some recent headlines:

"Booze sales are booming as people stockpile alcohol" (CNN.com)

"U.S. online alcohol sales jump 243% during coronavirus" (Marketwatch .com)

"Americans are drinking a crazy amount of alcohol during coronavirus lockdown" (NYPost.com)

We have a range of people reading to this. Many Christians don't see any need for alcohol. Other Christians would say that a glass of wine with your dinner is acceptable. But, they all agree: locking yourself away with a bottle doesn't solve any problems. If you fry your liver with alcohol, you're just in more danger from disease, viruses other. Also, I fear for the families of people who get inebriated during tough times. Abuse of all kinds increases with the amount of consumption. Alcohol and drugs are false saviors. They don't help anything. They just endanger the people who abuse them. ***A cabinet full of alcohol won't save you.***

So, why is this like the first Palm Sunday so many years ago? What do hoarding and substance abuse have to do anything we're discussing?

Let me repeat: In those days, the people of Jerusalem were looking for a savior. Sadly, they had some bad ideas about what their savior would look like. Because of that, in one of the most irrational and tragic events in history, they rejected their Savior when he came.

Why did those people have bad ideas about their savior? Because they had some bad ideas about their worst problem. They thought their worst problem was the Romans. They were afraid of the Romans. They were angry at the Romans.

But Jesus knew better. He knew that their worst problems were sin and death. And those things aren't helped by an armies or chariots or swords. ***Those things are helped by a Savior who's willing to die as a sacrifice for our sins.***

Today it's the same thing. We're all afraid of a virus. We're afraid, because we're all afraid of dying. And so, we look to strange saviors like hoarding and substance abuse. Before the virus, we looked to saviors like our jobs and our stock markets. Those have all fallen before this new enemy.

But we too, have a greater enemy. Just like the people of ancient Jerusalem, our greatest enemy is sin and death. We too, need a Savior willing to die for our sins. If we trust him. If we

accept his sacrifice, we don't need to fear death. We don't need to fear death because he has conquered it. For any who are worried about death, the Apostle Paul wrote these words:

51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—
52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

55 "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 15:51-56)

Conclusion

This Palm Sunday is different than any for 17 centuries because the doors of our churches have been closed. The world may close the doors of our church, but no one can close the eyes of our hearts. We can still remember that wonderful day almost 2000 years ago when the streets of Jerusalem rang out with praise for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

We can't stand in a crowd today, but we can look forward to the day when millions of souls will stand before the throne of the living savior, Jesus Christ. In that wonderful place, there will be no more disease. If any of our brothers and sisters in Christ have been taken from us for any reason, we will see them there.

The lights of our church building may be out today, but the light of the world, Jesus Christ, stands ready to reveal his will to us through his word.

Even if there isn't a church in the world open on this Palm Sunday, Easter week will still take place right on schedule next week. We can't join in the procession, but we can still remember in our homes on Good Friday that the path to the throne of heaven went over the altar of the Cross.

We won't be able to physically get together next week, but Easter is still coming. We can still remember that the King who rode into Jerusalem on a Donkey, was victorious, just as he said he would be. He has triumphed over the grave and showed it by walking out on the day we will remember next week.

This is a rare and awesome opportunity. Our whole world is afraid of dying. We can tell them that our Savior, our King, Jesus Christ lives, and he reigns forever. If we call out, Hosanna, Save us! He'll do it.

Let's tell the world.

