

Sermon: The Lord Needs It

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, March 28, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Why do we celebrate Palm Sunday in the Christian calendar? What is the meaning of waving palm branches in sanctuaries, as we re-enact the festive procession of Jesus entering Jerusalem ‘triumphally’?

Growing up in Taiwan where palm branches were plentiful and readily available, and sourcing a Christmas tree was near impossible, I have always thought the celebrations of Palm Sunday was tailor-made for sub-tropical climate. I love the atmosphere, the act of waving palm branches, the shouts of Hosanna, the whole-nine-yards.

Who wouldn’t want a mini-celebration marking the end of Lent? Who wouldn’t prefer a pre-Easter festivity comparing to the dreary and somber Good Friday? Come to think of it liturgically, since Good Friday happens, well, on a Friday, it is not too difficult to simply skip that part of Holy Week. One could go from the Palm festivity to the Easter celebration — sort of high to a higher height — without missing a beat.

It really wasn’t until much later, during my seminary study, that I really had to dive deep into those Scripture passages relating to the triumphal entry. I came to understand the action of Jesus as the symbolic act of a prophet — a kind of doing local theology in a political theatre.

It all started with Jesus approaching Jerusalem from near the Mount of Olives, as recorded in our reading today of Mark 11:1-11. Jesus had entered into Jerusalem a number of times before, mostly as pilgrim during Jewish holidays. However this time, it would mark his final entry as Jesus knew and had previously predicted his death.

The act of acquiring and sitting on a donkey deserves our attention. Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, in verse 2-4, *“Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’”*

The Scripture is not clear on how Jesus knew about the existence of a donkey colt that has never been ridden, nor does it explain why the owner of the colt should comply upon hearing the phrase 'the Lord needs it'. All we are left with is simply the obedience of the disciples in carrying out this instruction, and succeeding in their task. Then Jesus sat on the colt and rode it into Jerusalem amongst cheering crowd.

In 1994, during the Tennessee election campaign for the Senate seat, Republican Freddie Thomson was polling 20% behind against his Democratic rival, an insurmountable gap. Thomson needed to think outside the box. So against the advise of his campaign manager, he went out and rented a bright red Chevy truck. Thomson drove that truck to every campaign stops, to ever larger crowd, often giving speeches right from the lowered tailgate. People knew the truck was a 'rented stage prop', but it didn't matter. It somehow connected with the average voters in a 'folksy way'. Thomson would eventually ride that truck to an election victory. Years later, few in Tennessee could recall Thomson's politics, but many still remember Freddie's red truck.

I imagine when Jesus rode that donkey colt into Jerusalem, he knew exactly how it would connect with residents of Jerusalem, it would be seen as the coming of a Messianic king, as foretold by Prophet Zechariah, in chapter 9 verse 9: *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

Predictably, the people of Jerusalem responded as expected, they welcomed Jesus with shouts of Hosanna, echoing Psalm 118, a psalm of victory depicting the triumphal return of a king. Hosanna, which means 'save us' in Hebrew. *"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. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."* (Psalm 118:25-26)

It would be wrong to see this scene simply as a political theatre, as Jesus pandering to the masses. He gave the people what they wanted, but with a twist. Jesus was coming as a Messiah, but not as a conquering hero delivering the Jewish nation from Roman oppression. In the prophetic literature of the Bible, symbolic action of a prophet often contains a sharp cutting edge driven into the hearts of both rulers and people.

Isaiah walked around naked and barefoot for three years in the city of Jerusalem, as a warning for the people of God not to rely on Egypt in their

common fight against the Assyrians. Jeremiah bought a plot of land on the outskirts of Jerusalem, during a siege of the city, and buried the deed. All to convey the simple message of hope, that some day down the road, Jerusalem will rise from ashes and that plot of land will be worth a fortune. In my opinion, Ezekiel's symbolic action tops them all. He was told by God to lie down, on the left side for 390 days and on the right side for 40 days more, all while bounded by cords to prevent turning. Each day symbolizes a year of punishment that the house of Israel and Judah must bear for their covenantal unfaithfulness. All of these symbolic actions were instructed by God, all came with a specific message of judgement, in a specific context, given to a specific community of faith.

So what was Jesus saying to the people of Jerusalem, to the crowd that was cheering him on, waving palm branches while shouting Hosanna? What was Jesus saying to the same crowd that within a short period of time, will replace their praises with angry shouts of 'crucify'?

Well, nothing out loud, not explicitly, and certainly not recorded in the Bible. Implicitly, the message of riding on a donkey's colt, as I explained earlier, is traced to Zechariah 9:9. However, it is the following verse that I want to bring to your attention. Verse 10 describes what this triumphal king will do: *"He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off."*

In that surprising twist, instead of flattening Israel's enemies, decimating their adversaries, or wiping out their opponents, this victorious king is coming to take away the instruments of war from the people of God. No longer will they be able to wage war, they couldn't even mount an effective defence against an invader. All they are left with are prayers and hope — trusting in God only and totally with the covenantal promise of this Messianic king, who *"shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River Euphrates to the ends of the earth."*

It was a message that was lost to the crowd on that day, even *"the disciples didn't understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remember that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."* (John 12:16)

The challenge for a preacher preaching on the Palm Sunday, is to shift hearers from an easy identification with the cheering crowd of Jerusalem, to the potential, the possibility that we are all complicit with the jeering crowd of Golgatha. That potential, that possibility is not remote.

There is somewhere in our nature, a dark side. Within our capacity to offer unbridled praises, there lies also the capacity to be deceitful, violent, unfaithful. We are all sinners, fallen short of the glory of God, all needing God's forgiveness. Those of us who profess faith in Christ, are simply sinners under God's grace, who are willing to say 'yes' to Christ when told 'the Lord needs it'. We may struggle, we may stumble, we may even sin and turn on him again. Nevertheless, thanks be to God, the one we worship has a greater purpose. As the hymn proclaims:

"Ride on, ride on in majesty;
hark all the tribes Hosanna cry.
O Saviour meek, pursue thy road
with palms and scattered garments strewed.

Ride, on ride on in majesty;
in lowly pomp ride on to die.
Bow thy meek head to mortal pain;
then take, O God, thy power and reign."

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. He comes entering the gates of Jerusalem and the gates of our hearts. Turn your eyes onto Jesus, the humble and triumphant king on the back of a donkey's colt. Fix your gaze upon Christ, for he is the only one who can bridge the gap between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. He is the only one who can reconcile the chasm between God and humanity. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the only one who can forgive and heal and redeem and save. Hosanna! Save us, O Lord. He may be forsaken on the cross, but he will never never forsake us. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.