

"Blessed"

Psalm 118:1-2;19-29 Matthew 21:1-11 Philippians 2:6-10

PRAYER OF PRAISE

God of our salvation, we give you thanks for Jesus Christ our Lord, who came in your name and turned the lonely way of rejection and death into triumph. Grant us the steadfast faith to enter the gates of righteousness that we may receive grace to become worthy servants and citizens of your holy realm. Hear our cries asking you to Save Us and receive our Praise for doing so.

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 118

This morning's reading from the Psalm 118 was the Psalm that was on people's minds when Jesus chose to enter into Jerusalem. The chant that went up from the people was a direct quote from this Psalm. When we read the story later in the service you will hear them echo what I read now. Hear the Word of the Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 21:1-11

What happened on that Sunday long ago was not totally spontaneous. It was a deliberate act on the part of Jesus, demonstrated by the fact that Jesus sends two disciples into the city to make this entrance different from every other time he has entered that city. It is a fulfillment of what I read earlier from Psalm 118.

A pastor was once asked to speak at a banquet for a charitable organization. After the meeting, the program chairman handed the pastor a check. "Oh, I don't want this," the pastor said. "I appreciate the honor of being asked to speak. Keep the check and apply it to something special."

The program chairman asked, "Well, do you mind if we put it in our special fund?"

"Of course not," the pastor replied. "What is the special fund for?"

The chairman answered, "It's so we can get a better speaker for next year."

Life is full of humbling experiences. But, when we look at Jesus' parade through the Holy City, we sense that it was an act of humility. He did not choose to ride into the city upon a stallion, but on a donkey. He was not coming in the night and power of a conquering king, but as a humble servant.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is in stark contrast to Solomon's reception of the Queen of Sheba, (1 Kings 10:1-13,) and the acclamation of Jehu as king of Israel, (2 Kings 9:13). The garments and palm branches strewn in Jesus' path by the people, as well as their cry of "Hosanna!" reinforce Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the Savior of the common, ordinary people. There were no vast display of riches, no dignitaries and no loud

trumpets to greet the arrival of this king.

The cry of "Hosanna!" which greets Jesus (v.9) was originally a plea meaning "Help (or save), I pray!" traditionally was addressed to the king or to God but, by the time of its use here, it may have become a ritualistic liturgical formula of blessing or acclamation for a distinguished figure--like Hail to the Chief has become for a song to welcome the President or the song "Pomp and Circumstance" is used for graduations. As the representative of this God, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in the gospel of Matthew is a triumph of peace and humility over the forces of pride and hostility.

Can you imagine if Jesus had been treated like a 21st-century celebrity as he rode into Jerusalem? Wolf Blitzer would have reported on rumors that Jesus planned to disrupt temple business. Pundits would have argued about who he "really" was. Someone would undoubtedly have written a psychological profile for Psychology Today. Some tabloid would investigate Jesus' relationship with "the woman at the well or the woman who anointed his feet with oil and dried them with her hair. There would be in-depth analysis by cult specialists and modern-day Saducees on CNN and the Pharisees on FOX News. A council of church officials would be in place to verify the veracity and authenticity of Jesus' feeding the multitudes and walking on water. As he entered the dusty city, hundreds if not thousands would have taken selfies with him or photobombed him while Charlie Rose would stand by to offer color commentary.

Maybe that's why Jesus didn't choose to come in our century. While the celebrities of today are famous because they have hired promoters and agents, Jesus was celebrated by a relatively small number of followers who were not quite sure why they were there, except for the fact that something drew them to this teacher, this holy man. He could heal them. He spoke in mysterious parables. He was very different from anything they had seen before. And he loved them in a way they had never experienced before. There was something about him.

In a cruel and violent world, where most people were interested in basic survival, Jesus regularly stirred up enough trouble to risk his safety. In a culture where people shamelessly promoted themselves, Jesus told those he healed to "tell no one."

He was not swayed by current trends. He was not concerned with money. He had no problem with challenging those in power. His ministry was guided, nourished and planned NOT by the powers that be but by the only Power that really matters.

Considering the life expectancy of a man of his time he was not particularly young. He was most definitely not rich. His disciples were limited to 12 men of limited resources and a few women of some of whom had uncertain reputations.

Jesus was using his parade through the Holy City to teach that humility is the key to greatness. One of the things that Jesus made abundantly clear is that he came not to be served, but to serve. If we are ever to attain the humility of Jesus, then we must

realize that we, too, are called to be servants. If we do that we will be blessed, and because of that our world will be blessed.

Jesus blessed people's lives. He blessed and transformed the life of Nicodemus. He blessed and transformed, the life of the Samaritan woman at the well. He blessed and transformed the life of the man born blind. He most certainly blessed and transformed the life of Lazarus.

This morning's text tells how Jesus blessed and transformed the most significant religious event in the life of Israel--Passover. He blessed the bread and the cup of Passover and transformed Passover from a week of remembering the children of Israel's deliverance from bondage to Egypt to a week of celebrating the whole world's deliverance from bondage to sin through his life, death and resurrection

The one detail we know for certain is that his story never ends. It did not end in a procession in Jerusalem. It did not end on a cross. It did not end in a cave on the property of Joseph of Arimathea. It did not end because the calling was passed on from generation to generation. It was and is a relay.

On Friday night I joined in a procession-the Relay For Life. I was in the 16-20 year group at the end of the procession. Mike Wilson my co-leader of worship this morning was in the 1-5 year beginning of the procession. In between us was a long line of people who have survived cancer, and friends and family of folks who walked with them and friends and family of those who finished their race and had passed on their batons.

What impressed me in The Relay For Life was the diversity of the procession. There were people from all walks of LIFE, taking part in this relay. As I heard David Mohlman read from the stage, "Cancer does not discriminate."

As followers of Jesus we believe that dying is not the end of life. While we walk and raise money for research to find a cure for disease that takes away life in this world, we believe that even when our lives in this world end, it is not the end. It is not a battle lost; it is passing a baton to those behind us to continue as we drop out having run our leg. Life is a Relay—a Relay OF Life.

The story continues. It continues in the lives of people like you and me in whom the living Christ continues to work wonders. The story continues in us who are called to keep it alive. For those of us who have, by grace, found ourselves following Jesus it is an irresistible story, a life-changing story. We are as transformed as Nicodemus and the woman at the well and the man born blind and even as Lazarus was.

The procession that began on Palm Sunday continues. It continues because a finish line was never crossed. It continues because there is NO finish line. It is an eternal relay. Jesus handed his baton to his disciples. They handed their batons to those who followed them. It continues because the baton has been passed to us will be handed to

those who follow us when our leg had finished. The question before us as a church, the question we spent a good amount of our time in yesterday's session retreat, is, who is coming behind us? Who are we training to take our place when we finish our leg? Who will take your hand off?

I hope to keep participating in the Relay For Life until I make my last lap and hand off in my Relay OF Life so that, like Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy, I will have "fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:7)

Until then, my calling and I think our calling is described the way someone put it so simply long ago when he said: Find a hurt and heal it; Find a need and meet it. When we do this, we are on the road to being humble servants of Jesus Christ. When we do this we will be echo of the cries that he heard that morning when Jesus entered Jerusalem. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." When we do this, wherever we go, wherever we come in the name of the Lord we may hear, "Blessed are they who come in the name of the Lord! Then we TOO will be Blessed.!

Let's pray.

God of glory, God of grace, we rejoice with humble hearts as we celebrate the condescension of the One who was your equal but left such glory for a while, to become human, in the lowliness of servanthood, the pain of suffering, and the indignity of death. We raise our voices in exultation that you exalt Christ again in raising him to the heights and bestowing on him the supreme name in the whole universe, announcing that Jesus the anointed is Lord. All glory be given to you, in praise of your vulnerability and your victory, one God, great in grace and great in glory.

Heavenly Father, your son Jesus became like us, his brothers and sisters, in every respect so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in serving before you. Since you have received his sacrifice of atonement for our sins, receive also our ministry of intercession in the Spirit.

O Lord, save your people, and bless your heritage; be their shepherd and carry them for ever. Give your church the same compassion as our savior and shepherd, embracing little children, gentling mothers to be, feeding the hungry, anointing the wounded, cradling the weak and dying. Bring back to your fold those who have wandered away into wickedness or indifference or irreverence.

God of compassion, show your mercy to the parents of dying children. As one whose earthly Son was killed in the prime of life, you know the sorrows of a dying Son who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. By your power you raised him from death to give us hope in believing. To him you have received all who believe in him for everlasting life. When our time comes, receive us also for the sake of him who loved us and gave himself for us.

Hear us as we pray for those in need by name.

Lord, we pray for our soldiers who are serving their country on foreign shores and lands. We pray for a swift end to the fighting everywhere people grapple for power at the expense of others.

Bless our nation, leaders and people alike. that with a common reverence of your name and obedience to your law we may find new prosperity and peace. Save us from the worship of wealth and the dependence on brute force. Restrain our pride and rebuke our prejudices. Give us mutual respect and love as children of God. May our cries of Hosanna, Save US become cries of Hosanna, Save Us All! In Christ's name we pray. Amen.