

Sermon for April 14, 2019 – Palm Sunday

“The World Has Gone After Him”

Luke 19:28-40, John 12:9-19

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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Palm Sunday – what a fun day! We get to wave our palm branches; we sing encouraging music “Hosanna, loud hosanna;” it’s a fun upbeat day. But, oh my, it has so much to teach us.

Let’s set the context. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John is the story of Jesus raising his good friend Lazarus from the dead. “Take away the stone,” he said, because Lazarus had already been buried. His sister Martha said, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” But after saying a prayer, Jesus said, “Lazarus, come out!” And he did.

Now, at the beginning of chapter 12, Jesus has come to visit his friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, in their home in Bethany. He was on his way to Jerusalem, the end of the road. As he visited them, Martha cooked, and Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment, which irritated Judas greatly. And even in Bethany, a great crowd of people gathered to see Jesus, and to see Lazarus, which prompted the chief priests to consider putting Lazarus to death, too. Too much attention; too many people beginning to believe counter to their Jewish faith.

Then the big day arrived. They didn’t know it would forever be remembered as Palm Sunday, but here it was. Bethany was just a couple miles walk. It was also Passover time, so lots of visitors and pilgrims were present in Jerusalem, and some in the crowd had heard that Jesus was coming, the one who had raised Lazarus from the dead. This must be the Messiah. He is coming to take over. If he can raise a man from the dead, then surely he can set them free from their Roman oppressors, occupy the throne of David once again, and be their national liberator. For the people, the day was full of political implications. Just like in days of old, they wanted a King.

The crowd spread palm branches on the road, signifying a royal procession. Palm branches were used at the dedication of Solomon's temple; they were used at the rededication of the temple in 164 BC; and palms appear later on coins struck by Jewish insurgents during the first and second revolts to come after Jesus' resurrection.

And they cried "Hosanna!" which means "save us" or "save now." They intended to greet Jesus as a conqueror, and this moment as a coronation. To the words of Psalm 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," they added "the king of Israel." Their hopes and ambitions are certainly man-centered and nationalistic. They want Jesus to be their deliverer. None of this is lost on Jesus. He knows what they are seeking, so he answers their expectations by finding, not a conqueror's horse, but a donkey, and he is not riding on it, but sitting on it. Yes, He is coming as Messiah, but not the one they were looking for. The question would be, will they still follow him?

You see, then as now, the people had false and unholy expectations of what Jesus will do for us. As Roger Fredrikson wrote, we want the Lord to "be our errand boy and satisfy our needs; help make our way easy and comfortable; be on our side wherever we decide to fight... But all our perverted, self-centered hopes are radically altered by this One who comes riding on a donkey." It's like the meme I shared on Facebook this week. "'God won't give you more than you can handle' is an idolatry of self-sufficiency hiding behind spiritual sounding words. The truth is people are dealing with more than they can handle all over the world. That's why we need God and why God's given us each other. I know. I've had more than I can handle more than once. God gave me strength and God gave me people who came alongside me to bear my burden when I couldn't. I hope to do the same." Maybe you have seen that. It's true. What we think we need from God is so little, really, compared to what God gives us in Jesus the Messiah.

The focus for this morning, though, has to do with the last verse of this section in John. "The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'" The world has gone after him, or the whole world, or maybe better in context, all the people have gone after him. They certainly didn't know how the whole world

saw Jesus at that moment in time, but they could see that Jesus was a phenomenon. The people were eating this up. With the palm branches, and the shouts of Hosanna, and proclaiming Jesus the King of Israel, not only the Romans had something to be afraid of, but even they, the Jewish leaders, were at risk; they who were the communicators of the faith, the keepers of the law on which their faith was based, the guardians of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses and the prophets. There was a lot on the line here if Jesus were to grab the golden ring the people were offering. And at this moment, it didn't matter if he did or he didn't. Either way, he was a threat to them, too, because kings change things, and kings claim authority, and kings punish opponents. In this moment, they didn't see Jesus for who he was. It didn't really matter. They saw the people's reactions, and so they lamented. "All the people have gone after him!"

But had they? If the people really knew what Jesus was about, would they still hail him as king? He was far different than what they knew, a religion based on following a code of laws in order to be faithful. Jesus brought no code to them. He said "Follow me." "Come to me and I will give you peace." And what did Jesus do? He proclaimed the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace, of righteousness and mercy, of holiness and love. He sought out the downtrodden, the lowly, the sick of body, mind and spirit, the lost, the broken, the poor, the frustrated, the hurting. What earthly king does that? Show me a world political leader, a corporation business executive, people with worldly power, who do these things, who truly follow Jesus?

Following Jesus is not about following a set of rules. He freed us from that. We are called to be like him, to follow him, to teach him to the world. But our humanity thrives on rules. Even Paul, the writer of much of the New Testament, got stuck on rules at times. He was a student of Jewish law, and that was how he knew how to communicate, I guess. He made lists of laws that were meant to teach right and wrong, who's in and who's out. But Jesus didn't make lists, and he even broke laws that had been in existence for ages. When asked what was the most important law, what did he say to the lawyer? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your

neighbor as yourself.” That’s the law Jesus lived by. But it was more than a law to him. It wasn’t about a legal approach to living. It was and is a matter of the heart.

It’s amazing to me that all through history since early Christian days, we keep making laws, referring to laws, amending laws, restoring laws, and making up laws. Every tradition of Christianity has its laws, and in some cases it’s what makes each one a little different from the one before. The holy Catholic church established laws to govern and live by. Luther challenged those laws and their practice. Calvin had his how ideas, as did Wesley, and Menno Simons, and Alexander Mack; the Shakers, the Puritans, the Evangelicals, the Pentecostals, the Revivalists, the Jesuits, the Franciscans, and on and on. So many laws and variations of the laws. Is this the business that Jesus wanted us to be about?

Oh, but we have to define ourselves. We have to have a code so that people know whether they are in or out, abiding by the rules or not; are they in our group; do they see things like we do? One of these days the Church of the Brethren will divide again over rules. We’ve done it numerous times before, like every other denomination or religious organization. We keep trying to find a level of purity that doesn’t exist outside of Jesus himself. That’s why he said “Follow me.” And following Jesus is not a nail it down once and for all on a sheet of paper or on a set of tablets kind of event. It’s more of a daily journey. Lists are a Jewish thing, a human thing. We spend so much time refining our lists that we don’t spend our time living out the one law Jesus confirmed for us. Love God and love your neighbor.

We know Jesus was close to God, his Father. They had a special relationship when Jesus walked in human form, and he showed us how to connect with the Father, through prayer and worship, times of devotion and reflection. Notice that these are activities – a part of daily life. And he showed us how to love our neighbors, too. What was his list of priorities of people? The rich, the powerful, the influential, the leaders?; that might be our culturally approved list; but Jesus had no list. He took all comers, and he sought out those at the bottom of our culture’s list. And he told us to do the things that he did.

Palm Sunday is a great day! Jesus is welcomed as a king, just not the kind of king they expected. They would learn that over the course of the next week, when he’s arrested, tried,

and put to death by crucifixion. No, not the king they anticipated, but the King that has endured to this day, the King who is still alive in every believers' heart, who bids us come and follow him most of all. Be like Jesus, pray for his guidance, care for the lost and the lonely, and quit playing games with the rules. Jesus is so much more than that. Hosanna! Hosanna!