

March 24, 2013
Palm Sunday
Matthew 21:1-17
"Hosanna!"

(First read just Mt. 21:1-11)

I don't know what a typical Thursday is like for you all, but for me, Thursdays are typically sermon-writing days. There was something going on this last Thursday that made me particularly distracted while trying to write my sermon. Do you know what it was? (Gonzaga game) Yes, a lot has transpired since then!

Believe it or not, this distraction enabled me to find some parallels between the Gonzaga game and what happened on Palm Sunday 2,000 years ago. What is one thing both have in common? FANS. Gonzaga has an incredible fan base! So did Jesus when he rode the streets of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

What got me thinking about a possible parallel between Gonzaga basketball and Palm Sunday involved something I heard a radio commentator say. He asked, "If Gonzaga had a losing season, would their fans stick with them? What would happen if they started losing all their games-- would their fans remain as loyal?"

That's the question that lingers as we look at the crowd of people cheering for Jesus in our sermon text. What prompted their cheers? How long did they last, and what made the cheering stop? (We'll get to more of that later)

What's clear in both scenarios is, there are many kinds of fans who cheer for different reasons. Think of those who show up at Gonzaga games. There are the students and alumni who will cheer for the Bulldogs forever, whether they win or lose.

Then you have those who just love basketball, so they love Gonzaga in so much as they love good basketball. But if Gonzaga had a losing season, hmmm... I'm not sure if they'd stick around

You have the guests, those lucky people who friends invite who are maybe watching for the first time, curious to see what all the hoopla is about.

You have the people selling tickets and food. They have to be there... But I bet they sought out the job to be able to see games for free...

What about THE SPONSORS. They REALLY CARE if Gonzaga is doing well or not. But it's not entirely because they love Gonzaga, they know there's a price tag attached to winning. The more they win, the more fans will come, the more shirts will sell, the more sponsors will sponsor... the more money they'll make.

So all these folks may be fans at the same game, but not everyone is there for the same reasons.

What about those cheering on Palm Sunday. Who were they and what prompted their cheers?

I'd like us to look at Palm Sunday from this angle. All of us here today, you could call us "fans" of Jesus. We are followers just by showing up in worship today! Where do we find ourselves in the story? What kind of fan, what part of the crowd are we?

The first people who showed up in the story weren't cheering fans initially. But they set up the stage for all the applause that came later. These were the two errand boy disciples who simply did what Jesus asked without question. And there was a lot to question, because Jesus' request was so strange. Go to a complete stranger and ask for his donkey and colt? Say simply, "The Lord Needs them?"...

I don't know about you, but when I think of Palm Sunday I don't think about the 2 errand boys. But think of the joy they felt as they obeyed and saw everything fall into place... Consider how important their simple obedience was for God's will and prophesy to be fulfilled that day... (from Jer. 9, what John read) We often forget the behind the scenes servants in the crowd.

Next we have the cheering fans. Everybody in the streets, praising and shouting, laying coats and palm branches on the road...

Think the starting line at Bloomsday (all the people but also the sweatshirts in the street!) What's so incredible though, is that what prompted their cheers wasn't Bloomsday or a Gonzaga game, those cheers were for Jesus!

Why all the hoopla for Jesus at this moment?

Luke's gospel gives us a clue. Luke wrote, "the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully praising God in loud voices FOR ALL THE MIRACLES THEY HAD SEEN." Right before our text the crowds saw Jesus bring sight to the blind man. In John's gospel Jesus had just raised Lazarus from the dead! (Now, if that's not a reason to cheer...)

And then they saw Jesus come down the street on a donkey, just what the prophet, Isaiah, said the Messiah would do in the verses John read earlier.

One note- they laid their coats down, which is what crowds did before Kings and Queens. The use of palm branches on the road wasn't as common- I couldn't find that practice anywhere else in the Scriptures. But you know what I think? I think the people were so caught up in the moment that they used whatever was at hand to praise Jesus. I think of the spontaneous dancing of naked David before the Lord. I think of the Mary Magdalene pouring the crazy expensive perfume on Jesus, stories we mentioned last week. The people on Palm Sunday didn't have pompoms so they made their own!

So the people crowded around Jesus and shouted, "Hosanna!" which means, "God save us!"

And I want to say, Amen! What a perfect prayer for them to pray! Hosanna! Lord Save us! You saved the blind man, you saved Lazarus, come save us!

What a perfect prayer for US to pray, as we grapple with the broken places in the world and in our own lives... The illness, death, wars, violence, hatred, craziness happening in the papers and even next door... God save us!

It's that one-word, loaded prayer: HELP!

What's so great about that crowd saying Hosanna to Jesus is they recognized where the source of their help was going to come... from this man, Jesus, the Messiah, God's chosen

one, making his way through Jerusalem on a donkey.

But I have to tell you, as wonderful as that word Hosanna is, perhaps not everyone said it as a prayer.

This word was also said as a greeting, when pilgrims entered the temple. Like a nonchalant, "Hosanna." It's like when we say, "How are you?"

It can be a greeting, like, "How are you?", as we see a familiar face at the grocery store" or it can be a real honest to goodness concerned question, "HOW ARE YOU?"

So there might've been some-- Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna, or "HOSANNA!" as if your life depended on it.

What's amazing is that the Hosannas, both the mellow (Presbyterian?) kind and the ecstatic give it all you've got, produced quite a commotion. Matthew wrote, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the WHOLE CITY WAS STIRRED."

(Part of me wonders, was it the "hosannas" that stirred the city, or the presence of the Messiah, fully revealing his identity to the world?!

Did you know that this word for stirred is the same word Matthew used in ch. 27 to explain the earthquake after Jesus' death that tore the temple curtain in two?

Did you know it's the same word Matthew used again in ch. 28 to describe the earthquake caused when the angel rolled the stone away from Jesus' tomb?

Does this mean an earthquake accompanied Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem that day???

Most scholars say no, but it was enough for the whole city to ask, "WHO IS THIS MAN?"

That's such a wonderful part of the story. God's presence AND the peoples' praise wooed others toward Jesus! May we go about our days with such a sense of praise on our lips and in our heart and actions that others are wooed toward Jesus.

So which fans have we identified so far?

We have the quiet, errand-boy disciples who obey without question

We have the Hosanna!, God save us! Worshipers

We have the Hosanna- "I'm just going along with the crowd" crowd

We have the lookyloos, those who are wooed by the commotion and praise and want to know who this Jesus is.

And I want to say, that's it! That wraps it up! What a perfect ending. We could leave it at, "The people praised Jesus with loud Hosannas and many others came and followed Jesus-- THE END.

But we know there's more to the story. Next week we're going to celebrate the wonderful joy of Easter- but difficult things happen in between. There was pain and hardship and sacrifice. There was... the cross.

But even before the cross we have the rest of our passage. I'd like to read what Jesus did immediately after the praise and worship on the streets. You'd think the praise and worship would continue inside the temple of all places, but no...

Read Matthew 21:12-13

Scholars estimate that over 300,000 pilgrims passed through the temple at that time for Passover. The temple was their one stop shop. It was their place of worship, but it was also the bank, grocery store, and, at times, casino. Think of all the buyers and the sellers, the priests-- who profited from the proceeds. And Jesus said enough! (Note that the words Matthew used for "drove out" were the same words he uses when Jesus "cast out" demons!)... "My house shall be a house of prayer."

Matthew didn't tell us how the people responded to Jesus' outrage in the temple, but the other gospel accounts this quote from Martin Luther King explains it all: The truth shall set you free, but first it will make you very angry!!!

Where are the Hosannas now? Where are the palm branches now? Who sought out Jesus now?

The rest of the passage tells us. (Read Mt. 21:14) The blind and the lame, THEY are the ones who continued to cry out, "HOSANNA, Lord save us!" They are the ones who had nothing to lose, and all to gain from Jesus. They are the ones who experienced God's healing first hand from Jesus. Their hosannas do not go away.

But there are others who do not cheer as the lame and the blind. They are yet another voice from the crowd. Let's read the rest of the passage... (Read Matthew 21:15-17)

How sad. How sad the chief priests and the teachers of the law could not see the wonderful things Jesus did. They had wanted something else entirely from Jesus...

My daughter, Lily, had to make a speech to run for Student Rep. For her 6th grade class in middle school next year. She's currently student body Pres so we thought she had a good chance of winning. I asked her how her speech went when she got home and said, I lost. And I think it's because Jenna (who won) threw Air heads (candy) to the crowd!!!

Sometimes my journey w/ Jesus leads us to say, just give me the candy, Jesus! You'll get my vote if you just give me the candy, the good stuff, you know, those miracles and healings... and just leave it at that. That's enough for me Jesus. That's all I want.

We love what Jesus gives and provides until he starts messing with us! That's what he did with those chief priests in the temple. They'll put up with Jesus if Jesus works with THEM, but once he starts messing with their way of life, the system they've set up in the temple and all their popularity and profits... That's too much. Just give me the candy, Jesus.

And Jesus says, I came to do so much more than that! I came to save you and make you whole. I came to rid your lives of all that kills and destroys and separates you from myself. Jesus demands entrance into the temple, into OUR temples, so he can clear out all that is not good and right and true.

Might we let Jesus into our lives in such a way that we cry out, "Hosanna! Come save us!" - in whatever way we need it. Come Lord Jesus, come. We need you to save us. Amen.

O Palm Sunday God, who enters our heart with leaping hosannas, we rejoice and are glad to welcome your entry.

Come into our city and restore humility and honor.

Come into our church and transform us with eagerness and enthusiasm.

Come into our families and unite us as a supportive community.

Come into each of our lives and drive out the "money-changers" in our minds:

the passion for position and prestige;

the long-term guilt that eats away at our confidence
and self-worth;

the bitter loneliness that keeps us from caring.

God of Palm Sunday, point us to Good Friday.

Give us the courage to die to self-justification,

to pseudo-symbols of worship,

to false faces in the crowd,

to meaningless endeavor,

to expectations of magical cures for complex human struggles and to apathy which turns its
face from pain.

Give us the courage to care,

to know your love in our hearts

and to rise to your expectations of us,

even as we ride in the parade of faith.

Amen.

From *Gentle Words in a Raging Storm*:

Prayers for All Occasions

by Gary R. Weaver