

Cheers and Tears  
Mark 11:1-11  
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I think I've figured out how to achieve world peace. Well, the easy way would be to stop going to war, but that doesn't seem like it's going to happen anytime soon. Another would be to redirect funding to things that promote quality of life rather than promote death, but we humans seem hellbent on killing each other. So, I suggest we go with my idea to achieve world peace. We need more parades.

I have been to two parades in the last two weeks, which is not something I would expect to be doing at my age. The first one was the St. Patrick's Day parade downtown, where I saw a plethora of loud-revving motorcycles and political candidates and people wearing green. And then this past Thursday, I joined about 120,000 other Reds fans as we watched the Findlay Market Parade, a storied tradition on Opening Day that precedes the first baseball game of the season. Babies in strollers, kids on their parents' shoulders, grandmas in camp chairs, vendors selling cotton candy, and everything, all things, Cincinnati Reds. It's what I imagine heaven will be like, except in heaven the Reds will actually win on Opening Day.

As I watched the floats and the bands go by, I realized how diverse the crowd was. We were not divided by political party – Republicans on this side of the street, Democrats on the other side. We weren't separated by race or sexuality or any other human-made division. We weren't there because we all opposed something (well, maybe the St. Louis Cardinals, but that's another sermon). We were there because we were all for something. I said to my friend who went with me, "Wouldn't it be nice if, as a country, we could all galvanize around something, not because we had a common enemy, but because we had a common passion?"

Today, we celebrate Palm Sunday, the day in which Jesus makes his final entry into Jerusalem, which starts Holy Week and ends with Jesus hanging on the cross. This week is also called Passion Sunday, drawing on the original meaning of the Latin word "passio," which means "suffering" or "enduring." We Reds fans can certainly relate to that. And we start this week with, of all things, a parade. There aren't any marching bands, but there is singing and shouts from the crowd. There may not be any festive floats, but we have laid-out coats and palm branches. And, of course, we have a grand marshal, somewhat of a celebrity of his time, riding not in a convertible but on a donkey.

Why a donkey? Our image of a donkey may be Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh or some lowly beast of burden, but donkeys once carried a special meaning. In those days, kings rode horses in times of war; in times of peace, they rode donkeys. Obviously, Mark is making a statement about the nature of Jesus' kingship and, if the people were paying attention, they would have sensed that this king is going to be different than the one they are expecting. This king is not about going to war, but about bringing peace.

But no one is thinking about this on Palm Sunday. Everyone in the crowd is galvanized around the idea that Jesus will vanquish the Romans and free the Jews from their oppression. Of course he will! Have you see what this guy has done? He's healed lepers, made the blind see, made the lame walk. He's even gone so far as to forgive sins and confront the Pharisees. This is the kind of messiah we've been waiting for, and we know he's really going to give it to those Romans. How ironic that the crowd is praising Jesus today will be shouting "Crucify him!" on Thursday.

But not today. Today, the only shouts we hear are “Hosanna!” much like the shouts I heard on Thursday of “Let’s go Reds!” “Hosanna” is a curious word, one we don’t hear much today outside of this story. Scholars’ best guess is that “Hosanna” is a contraction of two Hebrew terms: “yaw-shah,” meaning to save or deliver, and “naw,” meaning to beseech or pray. So, you might translate the shouts of the crowd as: “We beseech you to deliver us” or, more succinctly, “Save us.” “Save us.” I think that’s about the most urgent, primal prayer we can ever pray. But here’s my question: What do you think you need to be saved from?

I posed that question once to a group of youth who were studying Jesus’s last week on earth. What do you think a group of youth would say they need saving from? I expected to hear “my parents” or “that upcoming math test.” But what I heard was so much more profound. The first youth who raised her hand and said, “Death.” A teenager thinking about death? There was a pause, and then one of the seventh graders said, “Pressure.” That’s when I realized we were going deep. Another youth said, “My parents’ expectations.” Wow. Then another shy individual, almost in a whisper said, “Fear. I want God to save me from my fears.” All of these answers struck me as more sincere than “save me from my math test.”

Can we dip down into our souls and be as honest as these young people were? When we wave our palms and boldly cry out, “Hosanna,” do we dare imagine what we really want God to save us from? Pause a moment and think about what you want Jesus to save you from. Save me from anger. Save me from cancer. Save me from depression. Save me from debt. Save me from the strife in my family. Save me from boredom. Save me from saying “yes” to that person who keeps taking advantage of me. Save me from the endless cycle of violence. Save me from humiliation. Save me from staring at the ceiling at 3:00 AM wondering why I exist. Save me from bitterness. Save me from arrogance. Save me from becoming my mom. Save me from loneliness. Save me, God, save me from my fears.

We have to be careful here, because we can get caught up in the crowd, hollering for Jesus to save us from whatever it is that we fear. But that’s not what God has promised us. Sometimes we get caught up in thinking that having faith is meant to make life a little easier for us, saving us from the difficulties that most people go through. And when our parade gets rained on, we are tempted to ask “Why?” In my last church there was an 82-year-old man named Tom. I got a called one day that Tom was in the hospital, so I went to visit him. While we talked I learned that this was the first time in 82 years that Tom had been hospitalized. What a good life! I said to Tom, “I can’t believe this is the first time you’ve been hospitalized.” He said with a sigh, “I know, I’m stunned, too. I knew this would happen someday, I just didn’t think it would happen this soon!”

While I can relate to Tom’s disillusionment, I have to wonder why we think that way sometimes. I can’t ever remember being promised life would be good or easy or pain-free, but at some point we came to expect that, so suffering was the exception to the rule. And when it happened, we might hear ourselves say, “What a second, God. Did you not hear me shouting, ‘Hosanna?’ I thought you were supposed to save me.”

Jesus says in John’s gospel, “In this world you will have trouble.” Not, “You may have trouble” or “Every once in a while, something not so good could happen.” He says, “You will have trouble.” The truth we learn from scripture and from Jesus’s parade is that in this life good times are to be savored because they are fleeting. The followers of Jesus were surprised when he didn’t turn out to be the king they wanted them to be. Their cries of “Save us!” quickly turn to “Crucify him!” and the crown they were ready to place on his head become a crown of thorns.

If you've felt that way, or if you feel that way, let me finish Jesus's quote in John: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." If we have the courage to speak Jesus' name, even in the midst of our most difficult, passionate times, we are testifying to the power of God in our lives. If we only have good days, we'll never be able to tell how God saw us through the bad times, we'll never be able to bear witness to others about how Jesus walked through our dark valley with us.

One of the things that you almost miss in this parade story is the very last verse: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple." Jesus has just come from this mountain-top moment where he's been cheered and adored by the crowd. And he knows in a few days that same crowd will call for his death. So where does he go in between? He goes to church. He goes to the one place where he knows he is accepted for who he is, not who people think he should be. He anchors himself in his identity as God's son, which gives him the grounding to handle all the shouts of "Hosanna" and "Crucify him!" that he'll hear this week.

How about us? After a week full of triumphs and disappointments, after a week full of exultations and inquisitions, after a week full of kudos and criticisms, after a week full of faith and doubt, we come to church, because church is the place where we can re-ground ourselves in God's love and forgiveness, and be reminded that God walks with us every step of our journey, whether on the parade route or into the fiery furnace. God is there, not miraculously saving us from all of life's problems, but walking with us through them. Maybe to be saved by Jesus doesn't mean we will avoid suffering, but that we won't go through it alone.

The Palm Sunday crowd thought they knew who Jesus was, that he would save them from the Romans. But he was so much more than that. If we are willing to walk with him through his arrest, his trial, his betrayal, his crucifixion, we testify to our trust that he walks with us through our own trials and betrayals. What would this week be like if we all galvanized around the hope that what Jesus is about to do for us will truly make a difference in our lives, in this world? What if we lived out the truth that Jesus's sacrificial love is for ALL of us, not just those who root for the same team we do?

Palm Sunday is not the end of the story. And it doesn't end on Maundy Thursday. And it doesn't even end on Good Friday. If we accept Jesus as a humble and lowly king who doesn't rescue us from trouble but who walks with us through it, then we've got another surprise waiting for us. Stick with him, worship with us on Maundy Thursday, spend time in prayer on Good Friday, stagger with Jesus to Golgotha, let your heart be sealed up in that dark tomb. Then be sure to come back next Sunday, when the real parade begins. There may not be palm branches or Hosannas, but there's going to be one divine Grand Marshal.