

Matthew 21:1-11; 27:28-29
March 16, 2008

South Plains
Palm/Passion

King of the Jews

Mounted, he comes into the city,
Riding not upon the charger fit for conquering kings,
posting in his stirrups up and up and up,
But swaying to balance his weight
upon the spine of a donkey
a little too small for a grown man.
His weight, the gravitas of presence so commanding
when he spoke,
Seemed slight, reduced somehow as if the swollen crowd
outsized the occasion until it swallowed donkey
and all, the way a cheering fan at the stadium
might suck a gnat down his throat –
“No matter, it’s the passion of the moment counts
the most.”

Cloaks which cost days at wheel and loom are tossed
beneath the nimble hooves
Along with branches from the palms
To cushion every rut and stone that might dislodge or
Interrupt the glory of that ride.
“Prepare the way,” make smooth the rough unlevel
places.

And did the rider smile and wave to modestly exult in
triumph?

Or, did he fix his eyes upon the goal,
repeating silently a psalm he’d chosen,
A word to steel his mind and purpose:

The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord who helps me;
who will declare me guilty? (Isa. 50:7-9a)

All around a different declaration:

Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name
of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven! (Matt. 21:9)
Hosanna cries the psalmist.
“Hosanna” prays for help,
a psalmic echo of the cries God heard in Egypt,
Cries he answered with an exodus, a rescue out of
slavery.

And thus Hosanna came to be a chorus,
 Passover set to psalm,
 a song of celebration for the feast
That brought a Savior to Jerusalem upon a beast of
 burden.
Sweet Zion, burdened with that Roman army,
Threw off their cares and cloaks in hopeful expectation
 Of Messiah,
The one who comes in the name of the Lord.

We sing Hosanna when we come to worship
 on this dreadful holy week,
This day the Lord has fashioned out of all the days
 that Jesus lived and walked the dusty roads of
 Palestine.
This single day he came into his own,
 received and cheered and blessed
 by all Jerusalem, or almost all.
King for a day.

Do we know more than they?
Do we who hymn our praises, wave our palms,
 know better him we celebrate?
We get the joke, the incongruity of crowds
 who cry Hosanna for the one they crucify,
The cruel irony of one who comes to save
 the ones who come to stare at death.
We stare at death each time we turn to news of
 crime, disaster and decay.
So much of what distracts us only feeds our lust
 for violence.

And do we know him any better?

And why did Jesus choose to make so great an
 entrance?
On this same day old Pilate, wily politician that he was,
Would make a grander entrance on the other side of
 town,
A gesture armed and dangerous
 just to warn the people not to trouble
 Pax Romana with their Passover.
Did Christ intend himself to be a foil of peace
 to Roman war,
 A pox upon the Pax of sword and spear?

He surely knew the prophet's words
 That tell the daughter Zion
 Look, your king is coming
 Humble on a donkey.
This king who would not claim the title
 when old Pilate threatened death
Did subtly place himself upon the prophet's throne,
 a donkey's back,
Insuring that for those with eyes to see,
 his coronation and his peaceful rule
 would picture kingdom come.

The grateful crowd that hailed their king, "Hosanna!"
Soon saw a second coronation that would crown his brow
with thorns,
And use his scepter as a whip to beat that head.
No longer mounted, now the Lord assumed the posture
Of the beast
Weighed down with cross until unburdened on that hill
They mounted him beneath a sign for all the world
To read, this "Jesus, King of all the Jews."

Hosannas did not ring amongst the streets that day.
No saving words were heard
Except asides, sarcastic mutterings,
"He cannot save himself."
Dark day indeed.

Palm Sunday confronts me every year with the
fine line we walk each and every Sunday between
passionate celebration in worship and solemn silence.
On the one side is our need to express our gratitude for
the love of God in Christ and for all the blessings of
salvation. We owe God a loud, joyful cheer of praise, a
Palm Sunday "Hosanna!"

On the other side of the line is our need to
acknowledge the darkness in the world. At the very
moment of our salvation, Matthew's Gospel points to the
darkness by telling us,

"From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until
three in the afternoon (27:45)." God's love is costly. It
always has been.

Worship walks between the light of salvation and
the darkness of sin. To ignore the darkness ends up
trivializing the light. To downplay the light allows the
darkness to overcome us. To worship in spirit and in
truth means to walk the reality of Holy Week from the
glory of Palm Sunday's triumphal entry to the tragedy of
Good Friday in order that we might know the power of
resurrection Sunday.

When we follow Jesus into Jerusalem, we are
following him to the cross where the sorrow of the world
is hung out for everyone to see. We sing Hosanna with
gusto, and we stand in silent wonder at the foot of the
cross.

The woman on her way out of worship said, "I'm
sorry Pastor, but I'm just not into sin."

"Well, what do you do with the dark and terrible
things happening in the world?"

"Somebody else will have to take care of that."

The "somebody" who takes care of that darkness
is Jesus Christ. The next eight days summarize the
meaning of his life and the key to meaning in our lives.
The darkness of the world has been overcome by Jesus
Christ. We can believe that. "Blessed is the one who
comes in the name of the Lord."