

Save Us!
Matthew 21:1-17

Palm Sunday/ 5th April 2020

There's something in today's Palm Sunday text that I never noticed until this past week. We've heard it so many times over the years that it's difficult to hear something fresh—this goes for preachers too. We've reenacted it with children waving palm branches. We've sung the story in our hymns, “All glory, laud and honor to thee, Redeemer King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring!”¹ What can this text say to these days that are scary and surreal?

Here's the scene. Jesus orchestrates his arrival into Jerusalem. He knows what he's doing, and he knows where he's going. Outside the city, on the Mount of Olives, he fetches a donkey, sits on it. The disciples, along with a crowd spread their cloaks on the road and cut branches. The crowds go ahead and follow him, shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mt. 21:9). When he enters Jerusalem, the entire city begins to shake, quaking in turmoil and chaos, asking “Who is this?” (Mt. 21:10). And the crowds answer, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (Mt. 21:11).

Now, I have to say, in this time when gathering in large crowds can be deadly, there's something unsettling about the image of being in a public demonstration like this with Jesus, without a six-foot safe distance and face masks. What if Jesus had entered into Jerusalem during a COVID-19 outbreak?

With or without the crowds, Jesus knows where he's going. He's heading straight up to the temple mount, the center of the religious and political life of Roman-occupied Judea. That's where he's heading. And he knows that what he's about to do will probably get him killed. “Yet steadfast he to suffering goes,” says the old hymn, “that he his foes from thence might free.”² Steadfast. Sure. Jesus goes to the heart of the religious and political life of his day (they were intricately connected). The moneychangers, to their credit, had a job to do. They had to convert Roman coin to Jewish coin so that animals could be purchased for sacrifice in the temple. All of this was legal. So, no Jesus wasn't “cleansing the temple,” here. Instead, with anger and fury he overturns the tables of moneychangers and, thus, *upends* the religious and political life of the temple. It's nothing less than revolutionary. Jesus isn't attacking Judaism; instead, he's calling it back to its roots, back to the original intent of worship and life with God to remember why the temple exists in the first place.

Jesus says, quoting the prophet Isaiah, “My house shall be a house of prayer” (Is. 56:7), and from the prophet Jeremiah, “but you are making it a den of robbers” (Jer. 7:11). According to Matthew, the temple lost its true purpose and meaning. The temple had become “a den of robbers,” a place to hide from corruption and faithlessness and selfishness and collaboration with forces, with empires (such as Rome), that really don't care about the needs of the people, oblivious to the needs, empires that are slow in coming to the aid of vulnerable, suffering, and sick people, especially the marginalized, the poor, those on the edges of society.

This is the part of the Palm Sunday story that's often overlooked, I think. Those crowds around Jesus were not shouting sweet songs of praise and adoration. "Hosanna" does not mean "praise." In fact, maybe we should stop using the word altogether. The crowds are really shouting at Jesus saying, "Save us!" "Rescue us!" "Help us!" It's a song of protest. Save us, rescue us, help us—from what, from whom? From *them*—from houses or institutions of self-serving privilege—temple, church and state. From greedy businesses. From those with power and money who thus hold life and death in their hands, unwilling to place their resources in service to God, a God who desires prayer and justice, who desires wholeness and healing.

That's when verse 14 leaped off the page at me this week—a verse I never noticed before, never associated with the Palm Sunday story (in fact, the suggested Lectionary reading for today stops at verse 11). It reads: "The blind and the lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he cured them." And this is a curious fact. Because, you see, according to Jewish custom, the blind and the lame were not allowed to go within the temple precincts! They were considered "unclean" and, therefore, denied access to the house of God. (See 2 Sam. 5:8 and Lev. 21:16-23.) Now the barriers that previously kept them out have been removed by Jesus. My question is, how did they know it was okay to go in? How did they hear the gospel-word, the good news that it was safe? The text doesn't say. They were drawn to him and he welcomed them into God's house, a house that could once again be a sanctuary. Not a den of robbers, but a safe place, a place for healing and renewal, a place for people who were on the margins and ignored can now be welcomed in.

And we're told that there were children in the temple precinct watching this amazing healing unfold before their eyes (Mt. 21:15). Then the children start crying out, "Hosanna!" But, again, not really "Hosanna," more like "Save us, Son of David!" Save us too! Rescue us too! Help us too! The religious leaders watched on in anger and fear, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus says them, "Yes, have you never read your Bible?"

Tom Long was my preaching professor at Princeton Seminary. He taught us to never use long quotes from books in sermons. We were told to use our own language. But I can't do better than what Tom says about Matthew 21. "Jesus' attack on the temple establishment continues to serve as a warning to all religious institutions, especially to churches. The essential mission of the church" he says, "is to increase the love of God and neighbor, and when Christians live as people of mercy and peace, forgiveness and righteousness, prayer and justice it allows the world to see the surprising ways of God and to draw near. The sign of a faithful church is that the hurting and bruised of the world—"the blind and the lame"—are healed and those whom the world counts of little value—"the children"—are gathered in to sing praise to the Son of David. However, when Christians simply mirror the grabbing and getting values of the world and then retreat to the safety of the sanctuary, then the living Christ enters this den of robbers and turns over the tables of religious respectability."³

On Friday evening I was grateful to hear that the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan, in Morningside, near Columbia University, will become a hospital, an extension of Mt. Sinai Morningside Hospital next door. St. John's is the largest cathedral in the world (it's still under construction). The enormous nave does not have pews, only chairs. The chairs will be removed and the space will become a 400-bed non-COVID-19 facility, which will

help free up space inside the main hospital for pandemic patients. Just consider this image: the cruciform shape of the cathedral's nave, graced by the beauty of its stained-glass and its stunning Rose Window, will be place of healing and, indirectly, allow for care, comfort, and healing to happen elsewhere in a city in turmoil, quaking with fear. What a *powerful—powerful and beautiful*—symbol for the church.

Around the world, the sanctuaries and naves of churches are vacant today, and will be during Holy Week and Easter. Yet the living Christ is entering these spaces, calling the people who usually gather there (or used to gather there, having wandered away ages ago) into a new life of service, calling us to be Christ's people in radically new ways. A faithful church is called to the ministry of healing and wholeness. This is what our houses of worship are for and what they become when our lives bear the cruciform shape of the Risen One, who never ceases to bring life to empty spaces and a future to people devoid of hope. *May it be so.*



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¹ “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” Text by Theodolph of Orleans (c. 820); music by Melchior Teschner (1614).

² “My Song Is Love Unknown.” Text by Samuel Crossman (1664); music by John Ireland (1918).

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 238.