



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

“From Palm Branches to an Empty Tomb”

Scripture Lessons: *Psalm 118:1-2; Mark 11:1-11*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.
on March 24, 2024, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Psalm 118:1-2

A Song of Victory

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!

² Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

Mark 11:1-11

Jesus’s Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem

¹¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” ⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

From Palm Branches to an Empty Tomb

“Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang; Through pillared court and temple the joyful anthem rang. To Jesus, who had blessed them, close folded to his breast, the children sang their praises, the simplest and the best.”

Of course, while the children's praises may have been the simplest and the best, there were also present that day the praises of a great many other people!

Modern day scholars estimate that over 500,000 people would have converged on the city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and some estimations say that it is possible that as many as half of that number could have been directly impacted by the events we read about in this morning's Lectionary reading.

Now, some in the crowd, I am sure, were merely spectators – they probably didn't know what was happening / didn't fully understand what all the fuss was about; though, it seems to me that even if they didn't know Jesus personally, they probably knew something about him, And if they didn't before now, they were certainly being brought up to speed.

Hearing about everything from his first miracle – the turning of water into wine – to how he restored sight to the blind, helped the lame to walk, fed 5000 people with just five loaves and two fish, how he had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead; oh, if there was ever a most fitting occasion for the phrase “Your reputation precedes you,” this was it!

In addition to family and friends, and perhaps spectators, there were also those who came more as confessors in the sense that they had been the ones who personally benefitted from Jesus' miracles.

Maybe they had had their body or their spirit made clean. Maybe they had heard Jesus preach his famous Sermon on the Mount and the Holy Spirit had moved them to repent of their sins and proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Family, friends, spectators, confessors – sympathizers! They were probably there too, perhaps moved by the witness of others or perhaps just plain tired of being burdened by the occupying Roman forces. Indeed, there were a lot of motivations that drove people to be in the crowd that day!

And Jesus knew it! He knew that some people wanted him to ride into Jerusalem on a beautifully adorned steed. But he decided to ride in on a donkey, fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy. He knew that some people wanted him to be a kingly figure, like David, sent to destroy the Goliath's of the world, but Jesus rested confidently in the knowledge that his Kingdom was not of this world. He was not going to trust in the plans of others no matter how well intentioned they were. No! Jesus was

going to trust in God!

The people – few, if any, grasped the depth of what was happening – because for them, Jesus was happening ... and there was excitement and comradery ... and not much else mattered. It didn't matter whether they were old or young, women or men, rich or poor ... the streets were a veritable melting pot that day. All kinds of different people bumping up against one other ... and isn't that a beautiful image?

As Christians today, ours may not be a street in Jerusalem; nevertheless, when Jesus comes through our streets, what does he see? Does he see us gathered with the most unlikely of neighbors? Does he find that we have allowed the love of God in our hearts to compel us to get excited and unite with others around the joy of God in our midst? I think we all know the answer to those questions!

We tend to keep with what we know / and who we know, but what if we spent just a little more time comingling with the people we don't know?

A friend shared with me the other day about a meeting he had had with a friend of his. They caught up at a local bar, and as they were talking it came up, for the first time, that they were of completely different political persuasions. After a pregnant pause, the question was raised, "Well, what do we do now?" And my friend responded, "Well, I guess we get another beer."

Our cultural climate, the tenacity of our positions – we have lost something of the ability to come together, even around noble causes. So entrenched are we in what we believe, that associating with people who believe differently hardly comes to mind, much less in the biblical imperative to love that person.

When my grandfather was living, I knew exactly where he would be each Wednesday. He would attend the German Friendly Society from 7 to 8 p.m., and then he would invite five or so friends to his home for ice cream. It wasn't always the same group, but several folks were regulars, and every once in a while, I was able to go.

I loved watching the older gentlemen poke fun at each other, and hearing all the jokes. I think it prepared me well for our men's Tuesday morning Bible Study here at First (Scots)!

I recall one evening in particular.

My grandfather was there (who was a staunch Republican), his brother-in-law, Fritz Hollings, was there (a classic Democrat), and General Westmoreland happened to be there that night as well. And, believe you me, he didn't take guff from anyone.

As I recall, they started talking about the atomic bomb. At points, the conversation became very impassioned, but what I remember the most about that evening is that at the end of it ... and as they turned in their ice-cream spoons, they gave each other handshakes and hugs ... they left as friends.

That doesn't happen as much anymore. It's hard to be in relational proximity with people who are different from us, harder still to do so with any sense of joy.

When things don't go our way, when we hear things that frustrate us ... we tend to put our drink down and hop off the bar stool. Bear witness to a kind of "hip hip hooray" Palm Sunday unity? Phooey, we're out of here!

Sadly, when we walk away from one another we negate what could otherwise be a blessed and divine tie that could bind us together.

I dare say, when we turn people off like a light switch, when we ignore their needs and treat them more like an enemy than a neighbor ... we might as well be saying, "Crucify him!" or "Crucify her!"

Oh, it's bad enough when we say that to one another. Imagine saying that to God! It happened you know ... it happened to people no better and no worse than us. Within the span of a single week, their shouts of "Hosanna!" became a distant memory.

We read in John chapter 19 a few words from that haunting episode in Jesus' life. Pontius Pilot presents the people with a choice – free Barabbas or free Jesus.

Beginning with verse 14 we read, "Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. Pilot said to the Jews, 'Here is your king!' [And] they cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!'"

So, how in the world did that happen?" Well, it happens to this very day! Oh, we may not say it out loud, but in the silence of our hearts we move from "Hosanna" to Crucify Him" all the time! Happy we are to be in close company with someone who, when the weather's fair and it's the high room of popularity but then something is said, something is done, and there is no forbearance, no forgiveness. When we follow a different path than God's, when we turn our back on who God is and who God has called us to be, oh, we say it loud and clear! And we say it the loudest when we refuse to show grace.

One would think that we would have learned by now that we who have received so much mercy, should show mercy!

It's not easy ... it certainly wasn't for Jesus. In a few short days, Jesus will find himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane literally means "olive press" or "oil press" and it really was, for Jesus, like

an olive press. He was being squeezed in by people on every side, people who had ideas about who he should impress and who he should serve. (PAUSE) Ah, even his followers couldn't seem to understand that the cross was integral to Jesus' mission.

But it was, and the sooner we come to terms with that the better! Reason being, if we are to have any hope of standing in solidarity with our neighbors – of doing something together with joy – if we are ever going to understand the depths of God's grace that we are called to express in our own life and in our life together ... then we must have that long view in mind. That faithful perspective that affirms that though Gethsemane will come, though Calvary will come ... so, too, does the empty tomb!

To be certain, no lack of unity among the people of God, no lack of grace on our part -- nothing impairs God's ability, in Jesus Christ our Lord, to reconcile the world to himself! Nothing infringes upon Jesus' gracious and sacrificial act, not to mention his own witness which has declared in no uncertain terms: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

By the wondrous workings of God's Spirit ...

- May this Palm Sunday inspire within us a much stronger sense of what it means to come together with our neighbors around the causes of Christ / those things that make God's heart smile
- May it inspire us to remember the lengths to which Jesus has gone to forgive us so that we may show that grace to others
- Indeed, by that grace and through faith may we rest confidently in the knowledge that Jesus, who would die would rise again! And that that victory over death is ours to live by and it is ours to share!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.