FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"THE BATTLE IS THE LORD'S"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 21: 1-11

This sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 29, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Matthew 21: 1-11

Jesus's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

1 *When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,* 2 *saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.* 3 *If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."* 4 *This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:*

5 *"Tell the daughter of Zion,*
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

6 *The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;* 7 *they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.* 8 *A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.* 9 *The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*
"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

10 *When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"* 11 *The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

The Battle is the Lord's

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Following worship this morning, the children and friends of our church family will scatter across the churchyard, into the playground and graveyard, and they will do so with eyes wide open and hearts pounding, searching for eggs that have been hidden. They will be, as Coach Dabo Sweeney is prone to say, "all in" – fully committed, fully engaged. And I have no doubt that there will be joy and noise, and probably an element of holy chaos. And if we watch closely, we'll notice something else. The children, they won't hesitate, they won't second guess themselves. They'll just go!

In some ways, Palm Sunday feels like that. The crowd is caught up in the moment. They're waving branches, laying down cloaks, and shouting with all their might: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Ah, the energy is unmistakable, the expectation palpable. Now, there's no doubt that some of the people who lined the streets that were looking for a victory that would be won on the

battlefield of the human heart, though my guess is that most of the people were looking for a victory that would change the political and cultural landscape.

All of them, though – men and women, young and old – they were searching for that which had seemingly been hidden from them, a savior. Nevertheless, something happens between the shouts of "Hosanna" today and the cries of "Crucify him" at the end of the week. And to better understand what that was, we need to step back in time a little bit and one of the stories we can look to is the one about that famous battle which took place in the Valley of Elah.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning from 1 Samuel 17, Israel is paralyzed with fear. The Philistines are encamped on one hill and the Israelites on another, and so they each hold some high ground, and neither is willing to give it up. It is essentially a stalemate, and in the valley between them stands Goliath, a giant of a man. Day after day, for nearly six weeks, Goliath comes forward, mocking the armies of the living God: "Give me a man, that we may fight together." But no one goes. Not Saul. Not any of the seasoned soldiers. No one. The people of God stand silent, facing an enemy they cannot defeat. That is, until David arrives, but David is young. He is not a warrior. He has no armor, no sword or spear, but what he does have is faith, and David says what no one else will say: "The battle is the Lord's." And in that statement, we learn everything we need to know. You see, David understands what Israel has forgotten: this is not ultimately their fight. This is God's battle – and it will be God's victory.

During my sabbatical a few summers ago, our family was blessed to travel through Germany, Switzerland, and France, following the footsteps of some of the greatest protestant reformers, and sometimes, as we were negotiating stepping off a train and onto a platform, we would hear the conductor say: "Mind the gap."

And that would prompt us to look down and take what was sometimes a large step over the gap between the train and the platform. Now, we never encountered a gap so expansive that we could not cross it, but I dare say, in our Old Testament lesson this morning, the Israelites did! There was a huge gap between where the Israelites stood on that ridge and their victory over Goliath and the Philistines. In a sense, David was told to "mind the gap," and he did so by stepping into it – by standing "between" God's people and their enemy.

But lest we think that David is the primary hero of this story, we would do well to remember that David is not the Savior. In fact, when we consider that God invites us to read even the stories of the Old Testament in light of their witness to Jesus, then we can see how David is for us a pattern, a wonderful foreshadowing of what God would one day accomplish in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And when we stop and think about it, we can pick up on some of the similarities. David stands in the gap and Jesus stands in the gap. David faces the enemy of God's people and Jesus faces our greatest enemy – the power of sin and death. David fights a battle the people cannot win and Jesus wins the battle we could never fight. But here's probably the most striking parallel: just as David declared, "The battle is the Lord's," so too is the victory of Jesus, the absolute work of God.

In Matthew 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem, and the crowd cries out, "Hosanna!" which means "O save!" and they call Jesus the "Son of David." And they are not wrong. Jesus is of the line and lineage of David. They Perceive Jesus as a king, a deliverer, a champion, but they misunderstand the kind of king he is. They expect a warrior, a political victory. They expect Rome – their Goliath – to fall.

But as Jesus draws near, he has no armor, no sword or spear. He even rides in on a donkey, which is just as the prophet Zechariah had foretold: "Lo, your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey." To be certain, Jesus is a different kind of king than the world expects, and his is a different kind of battle. Here again,

it is God's battle! And as surely as God could win a battle with a stone in a slingshot, God could cause stones to cry out. But that wouldn't be necessary, because the crowd will not be silent. God's purposes will not be silenced. What's more, the whole of God's creation seems to participate. Branches, a donkey, a colt, the road beneath Jesus' feet. But they all point to something beyond themselves. For neither were they created, nor were they co-opted into this story to become the center of the story. Yes, the stones could cry out, but only because the king had come. Taken together, our Old and New Testament lessons give us reason to admire David's courage, and to celebrate Jesus' victory. But if we do not entrust ourselves to that victory, then we really haven't taken these stories to heart.

The crowd on Palm Sunday was enthusiastic, but their enthusiasm faded. They wanted a Savior on their terms, and when Jesus did not meet those expectations, they turned away. And it begs the question: Are we so different? I mean, we too are quick to shout "Hosanna" when life goes our way. It is easy to celebrate Jesus when he meets our expectations. But what happens when he doesn't? What happens when the worst thing we can think about doesn't get overthrown? Or, what happens when any path leads not to triumph, but to a cross? What happens when following Jesus means surrender, rather than control? Even victory, it turns out, does not always look the way we expect.

Looking back again, in 1 Samuel 2, Hannah offered a prayer, a song to God and in it she said, "He will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed." Now, Hanna had now way of knowing how her words would be fulfilled and I have no problem affirming how they were fulfilled in David's life, and how it was that Hanna's own son, Samuel, would one day anoint David as the future King. But I also find myself thinking about how Hanna's words would ultimately be realized in the King of Kings, the true Anointed One!

Mary, the mother of Jesus, would later echo much of the same truth that Hanna professed in her own prayer wherein she professed that "the proud would be brought low, and the humble lifted up." Friends, that is the kingdom of God and because it is God's kingdom, we are called to trust – not in our strength, but in God's. We follow not a Savior of our own making, but the very Jesus who has been revealed to us in the Scriptures – the one who was crucified, risen, and ascended.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit, and when we face the giants of our lives – be they fear, or uncertainty, or sin – we face them not alone, but with assurance because we know at the end of the day, "the battle belongs to the Lord." That is the joy which surrounds us on this Palm Sunday. Perhaps not unlike the joy that will be on full display when our children soon run about with reckless abandon. So, what if our faith looked more like that? What if we ran toward Jesus with that same wholehearted trust, not because we trust the One who has already won the victory? Ah, this is the truth of the Gospel, that be it a stone that has been thrown or a stone that has been rolled away, the victory has been won! The King who entered into Jerusalem on a donkey, he now reigns in glory. And that alone is what allows us to join that festive procession and sing together. "To Thee, before Thy passion, They sang their hymns of praise: To Thee, now high exalted, Our melody we raise."

That verse asserts something that we understand that those first Palm Sunday observers did not, that Jesus saves us not by avoiding the cross, but by dying on it! Oh, the Valley of Elah has nothing on Calvary's hill, for there, on the cross, God fought the ultimate battle, he fought the powers of sin and death so that we might be set free to live and to love. That battle has always been the Lord's. And praise be to God, he won it!

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