

Palm Sunday A
April 9, 2017
“Boot Camp for the Soul: Celebration”
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
David Noble

Psalm 118

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

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

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

²⁷The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Matthew 21.1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “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.” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 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!” When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

1.

He arrived as King and Messiah. But not riding on tank, waving to crowds, surrounded by security and all the trappings of power. No, this Messiah came into town on the back of a donkey. If his arrival was meant to be triumphant, a parade down the Canyon of Heroes, then his triumph was of a different sort, a very different sort. Jesus arrived with humility, as one who had personally served and would continue to serve the people.

He arrived as the old scriptures had pictured it when they said- “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.” (Zech 9.9) This is the servant King of peace and reconciliation that had been foretold for generations, and was now entering the gates of his capital city.

And he was hailed with shouts of “Hosanna” and “Blessed be the One who comes in the name of the Lord.” These common folk had nothing but the clothes on their backs, but that was enough to make a royal carpet to welcome this unusual King. Over his three years of ministry, Jesus had captured the imaginations of these people. And he had nourished their souls only as he was able to do.

He had taught them in open air revival meetings—declaring blessings on the least of them. He had healed many, and in the crowd were two blind men he had just healed by the side of road—needy men who had been shushed and ignored for years, but whom he touched in violation of the law and who now could see not only with their eyes but with their hearts that this was the “Son of David,” the Messiah. And no doubt there were some still following him whom he had fed with a few loaves and fishes, not once, but twice. And they all had heard the good news that came from his lips whenever he talked about the kingdom of God coming near to them, a kingdom where they would celebrate his peace and justice and reconciliation.

2.

This Palm Sunday we celebrate this crowd of common people that came together from near and far to accompany Jesus into the city with shouts of joy. Around Jesus they had become a community, a courageous community that proclaimed their allegiance to this humble king riding on a donkey. Courageous, because they knew the authorities were plotting Jesus’ death. But on this day it does not concern them. Shouts of “Hosanna” were not just shouts of “Hooray!” Hosanna means “save us.” These were cries of faith, yes, but they were also political cries for help to establish justice and shalom and reconciliation in an authoritarian environment. Their society was divided into those who were in and those who were out. Some were privileged and others were deprived, not by chance, but deliberately. The poor, the weak, the sick—so many were declared unwelcome.

As they shout “Save us!” it’s only instinctive that we join them in crying out. We too know division. We also see how power and influence and authority is used to divide our world into those who are welcome, those who are less welcome, and those who are not welcome. We too cry out for justice and shalom and reconciliation, knowing that this humble servant King is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

3.

As a community of those who march alongside Jesus, we know that together we can witness to his resolve to bring peace and reconciliation into our relationships, and communities, and world. We know he can do this with us, because we have seen it before.

People of faith came together to establish the Underground Railroad, beginning in the 1830’s. 50,000 black slaves escaped from the south and headed north, even here to New Jersey. When coming by sea the Cape May lighthouse guided them to freedom up the Delaware River. When they came by land they went from town to town up through the state until they arrived at a major stop in Jersey City and on up to Boonton and points north. It was community, and to a great extent, communities of faith guided by the mission of Jesus, that made this possible.

In Germany during WWII, our spiritual cousins, the Lutherans, struggled to decide whether to support Hitler and his racist strategy, or not. Looking back it seems impossible, but many Lutherans went along. However, a branch of the German Lutheran Church, known as the Confessing Church, resisted the Nazi attempts to take over religious life. They resisted the

authorities, subverted the laws of public assembly, communicated clandestinely with churches around the world, and spoke up eventually against the persecution of the Jews.

And today people of faith march and speak up for peace and reconciliation. I know some of you were among the 2.5 million in the Women's March a few months ago. Many people of faith marched for peace and for the reconciliation of a nation and world that is divided in many ways. And I know some of you march in the annual Aids Day Walk in the city as an expression of your faith and your desire for peace and reconciliation for all.

4. As we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem we also remember these more contemporary marches and processions that carry on our Messiah's mission today to heal divisions, bring people together, and nurture shalom for the good of everyone. There is no reason this cannot continue. We can be encouraged by these memories to keep on gathering around our savior, keep on marching to establish his peace in our families and our nation and our world.

Even though we are common folk and have no special authority to make changes in the world, we are able, together, to proclaim the work of our Messiah in this world and look for his peace to flourish in the most unexpected places.

5.

"Who is this?" the people of Jerusalem wanted to know. "Who is this unusual king?" "Jesus, the prophet," the crowds responded. "The son of David, the Messiah." And the authorities were disturbed, Matthew's gospel says.

Why?

Because it might become a movement that would keep going and challenge their status and power? Because Jesus was awakening a deep yearning for a new society of justice and life affirming policies and leadership?

Well, he is still disturbing, still contesting, still resisting, still gathering, and he invites you and me to embody his peace and his reconciliation as an ongoing practice and he invites us to stand boldly with "the One who comes in the name of the Lord."¹

¹ From Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective for Sixth Sunday of Lent (Liturgy of the Palms), by Veronica Miles, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, p152.