

Text: Psalm 118
Title: Palms of Paradox
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Roger Allen Nelson

Every year on Palm Sunday he preached the same sermon. Every year the congregation knew what to expect. They anticipated some lines and joined in a call and response without hesitation or stumble. They found great comfort in its familiarity and great joy in its annual retelling. Every year on Palm Sunday he preached the same sermon.

The sermon was an account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. The minister imagined what it would be like to be a little boy on that day and in that lad's voice he preached a story that was rich with detail ~

the little boy squeezing between husky legs to catch a glimpse,
the smells of sweat and dust and donkey dung,
the rhythmic chanting of the crowd,
the fervor of the frond flapping follows,
the rough and tumble feel of the rocky terrain,
the hopes and fears in the heart of a little boy....

It was a colorful and engaging story.

The minister grew up on a farm and he knew the ways of donkeys and chickens; while in college he studied the theater and he had a dramatic charismatic gift. The sermon was a delightful mix of rural wisdom and thespian flair. The congregation was urban and poor. They laughed with deep affection as their pastor paraded around in a bathrobe waving a palm branch. And, when the crowd needed to chant "Ride on King Jesus, Ride on!" theirs was no meek or mumbled response, they stood and cheered as if the donkey was coming down the center aisle.

Yesterday morning I asked members of that church what they remembered about this annual Palm Sunday sermon and there was an immediate gush of laughter and energy as they all began to talk at the same time....

They remembered that the little boy was carrying a chicken under his arm and that by stroking the chicken from forehead to beak the chicken would stay calm.....

They remembered that the boy had a rock in his pocket and that if they didn't praise God the rocks themselves would cry out.....

They remembered that tears would well up in their pastor's eyes as he saw Jesus in his mind's eye.....

They remembered that toward the end of the story the boy would run though the crowd to whack the rump of donkey and holler out, "Ride on! Ride on!"

Every year on Palm Sunday he preached the same sermon.

Besides wishing I could pull off something similar, what was remarkable about that preaching experience was the way in which it engaged and enfolded the listeners. The first words spoken when I asked about it yesterday were, “It transported you. It was so vivid. It was like you were there.”

That annual sermon enabled a small inner-city African American congregation to be part of a Hebrew procession. That story became their story. They could see Jesus on that donkey. When they waved palm branches they were part of that first parade. They were enfolded into the story and a Passover procession became their procession. They picked up an ancient story and made that story their own.

Now, in a similar fashion the Jews on that pathway into Jerusalem picked up an ancient song and made it their own.

They took an old familiar song and sang it in an unfamiliar moment.

They enfolded an old song into a new setting.

They sang an old tune in new key.

They picked up a psalm and infused it with new meaning as Jesus bounced along on a donkey on his way into Jerusalem.

They quoted a psalm and applied it to Jesus.

The Old Testament passage most often quoted in the New Testament is Psalm 118. It is a complex psalm with a plethora of powerful lines and memorable images. And, while it certainly doesn't read as subtly or sublimely as other psalms, as Jesus made his way toward Jerusalem the imagery of Psalm 118 is the imagery that the people recognized. They saw Psalm 118 embodied by Jesus and that psalm served as a framework for the gospel writers. So, for example:

He goes up to and through the gates of the temple. (Verse 20)

The crowd cries out *Hosanna*, which means “save” or “save us.” (Verse 25)

They cry out “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Verse 26)

They carry branches in the procession. (Verse 27)

And, verse 22 about the rejected stone becoming the chief cornerstone is picked up in three gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and one of Peter's letters ~ as a way to interpret or identify Jesus.

Part of this application is because Psalm 118 is the final psalm in a series of psalms that were sung in preparation for Passover or other annual ethno-religious festivals. Starting with Psalm 113 each subsequent psalm tells a story that is recapitulated and culminates in Psalm 118. In the same way that the gospels gradually build to Jesus entering Jerusalem, this series of psalms builds to the great imagery and proclamations of Psalm 118.

So....., it is totally believable that a little boy living under Roman occupation, who heard these psalms sung every year, by rabbis who had a flair for the dramatic, would realize that this day was a convergence beyond the coincidence of familiar images

and he couldn't help but join the processional,
and cheer with crowd,
and pin his hopes on the one riding the donkey.

Ride on King Jesus! Ride on!

C.S. Lewis writes that praise is spontaneous. In his words:

... the most obvious fact about praise – whether of God or anything else – strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses, readers praising their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least.

Dear friends, can we imagine that on that day outside of Jerusalem praise sprung up spontaneously as the crowd saw in Jesus the embodiment of hope, the chance for change, and the whisper of a long awaited justice?

And so, without checking the implications,

without asking questions,

without debating the details,

without weighing what comes next,

they threw caution to the wind and broke into a song of praise.

They threw their heads back and sang a psalm where their enemies were cast down, and the poor were picked up, and those who had been tossed aside like rubble became the cornerstones on which a kingdom was built.

And who can blame them?

When we're tossing and turning at night about jobs and money and the future, when we're perplexed by clouds on the horizon, when we're burying dear friends, when we're wedged between watching our parents age and worrying about how our children will find their way in a complex and changing world, when we're learning again and again how to be married, when we're longing for meaning in our jobs, when we're fumbling about with the same destructive habits, when....

It is hard not pin our hopes on a savior and break out into a song of salvation.

Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid.

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior.

From the rocky road leading into the Jerusalem, to a tough little church on the city's south side, to this gathering of Hope, songs of praise rise up and our stories intertwine and we hope in a Savior.

Ah!

But, the dilemma of Palm Sunday is that we sing under the shadow of the cross. And the paradox of the palms is that the same ones who are crying “Hosanna” on Sunday will shout “Crucify him” on Friday. The same ones who sing for Jesus on Sunday demand Barabbas on Friday. The same ones who lay down their coats on Sunday turn their backs on Friday. Hailed as a king on Sunday; hung as a criminal on Friday. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” on Sunday; “Cursed is the one who hangs on a tree” on Friday. Palm branches on Sunday; pitch forks on Friday.....

In a few short days the spontaneous celebration of praise and hope turns into the dark shadows of despair, denial, and disappointment. And if it was true for them, trust me it is true for as well.

Note: An essay by Scott Hoezee got that list of Sunday to Friday started...

Well, what are we to make of all that?

A handful of days before Clarence Boersma died the hospice doctor told him that he didn't have long to live. It was another brutal and biting wave as Clarence faced dying. Just a few days earlier he was still talking about getting out on a golf course this summer.

By chance I showed up just after Clarence got this word. I sat beside him on his bed, both of us silent for long time, drained by the doctor's news. Finally I fumbled out a few words that he was surrounded by a family that loved him deeply and a great circle of friends and a loving church and that he had a good rich life and that God was present.....

He smiled and said that he had a good life and that there was some bad too, but that God had been present and God was even present now.

Dear friends, can we say that part of the mystery of a biblical faith is not that we're rescued from death but that we pass through death and God is present for every step of the parade? Our faith doesn't end on Palm Sunday but our faith travels through Good Friday. Our hope is not in a conquering king riding in a steed but in the very son of God hung on a cross....

And, it's not that we skirt death or sidestep struggle, but that God joins us even there. Not that our hope is just in any Savior, but our hope is in a Savior who knows death. Our hope is in a who was Savior dead on a cross, but also who raised up in resurrection. And as he joins us in death, so to we join him in resurrection.

So, wave a palm, and sing a psalm, and join the parade.
Ride on King Jesus, Ride on!
Amen.