

Tracy Daub  
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Matthew 21:1-11

## CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

The people welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem wanted a savior. And they got one. Just not the one they were expecting.

Their shouts of “hosanna” were a triumphant cry of joy. Their Savior had arrived, the one they believed would rescue them from the bondage and misery inflicted upon them by the Roman Empire. So the crowds shouted “hosanna,” a word that means “save us!” As Jesus processed past them, they cried out their joy for the arrival of their hero and they waved palm branches because that is what people did to welcome a military hero who had saved people from their enemies.

The crowds wished for a savior. And they got a savior. Just not the one they anticipated.

The first clue the people should have had that this savior was not going to match their expectations was evident in his mode of transportation. Depending on the gospel account, Jesus rode in on a donkey or a colt. Or, as the writer of Matthew’s gospel records the story, *both* a donkey and a colt at the same time! It was Matthew’s awkward and amusing attempt to connect Jesus to the predictions made in Hebrew scripture.

The point is, that Jesus’ grand entry into the city was on a very uninspiring, ordinary farm animal. Imagine if today we were holding a parade for a great military hero and instead of arriving on top of a tank, he came pattering into town on a John Deere tractor. It would be kind of a letdown.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, arrived in Jerusalem ahead of the Passover festival with all the pomp and pageantry one associates with

power and prestige. He would have been astride an impressive steed, and flanked by soldiers dressed in flashing armor.

But Jesus' entourage included neither an army nor the rich nor the famous. Instead, Jesus was accompanied by uneducated fishermen, some tax collectors, and a few women. Not a very impressive fan club.

The people wanted a savior and they got a savior. Just not the one they expected. This realization that Jesus would not be the military savior they expected began to dawn upon the people over the course of the week as this savior allowed himself to be arrested and executed like a common criminal.

The crowds were not wrong in wanting to be saved from their misery. Their suffering under the Roman occupation was severe. No one can blame the people for desiring to see those oppressive forces overthrown. But God does not save us by replicating the forces and values and methods of this world. God will not dominate with violence or coercion. Instead, God's power is exercised through love, God's dominance triumphs through humility, God's victory is won through transformation.

That's what Jesus Palm Sunday procession reveals to us: the arrival of a savior who comes with a strength rooted in humility and love to answer our cries for salvation. In Jesus we have the arrival of a savior who joins us in our suffering and who overpowers the forces of evil with a sacrificial love that transforms the human heart. Yes, we will be saved. But it won't be how we expect.

All these centuries later, we still want and long for a savior. If you're like me, you want a savior to will bring an end to situations where nine-year olds get shot to death in their school classrooms. Or who will stop the deaths of men and women of color in police custody. Or who

will rescue our planet and its creatures from catastrophe. We want a savior who will heal our fractured relationships and mend our wounded souls. We shout “hosanna” today because we want and indeed need saving.

As you wave your palm branches today, what do you need saving from?

Today we join the biblical voices crying to God to save us. But let us be careful what we wish for. God answers our prayers but in a way that will not likely make us entirely comfortable. The savior God sends us makes some pretty challenging demands of us. Jesus doesn’t swoop in and fix everything. Jesus doesn’t come to make our lives easy. He comes to make our lives meaningful. He saves us so we will know we are loved and that love will change us. He saves us so that we will know that everyone else we meet—be they stranger, friend, enemy, or relative—is also loved by God, and knowing that will change how we interact with them. Jesus enters our struggles and brokenness, as he did Jerusalem long ago, and he summons us to step into the parade with him and join him on a saving way.

Today we’re part of that ancient crowd, cheering the arrival of our savior, but Jesus calls us to do something more--to join him in the procession. So here’s the question: are you willing to step into the procession and follow Jesus on his way, a way that saves us? Because if you are willing to step into this Palm Sunday parade after Jesus, we have to remember where this path goes. It goes to the cross. Jesus tells us that if we want to follow him, we too must be willing to take up our crosses. Crosses are heavy. So the saving way of Jesus will involve some heavy lifting. Forgiving those who have hurt us is heavy. Trying to love our enemy is heavy. Caring about the welfare of people society would prefer to cast aside—the migrant, the incarcerated, the addict—requires bearing the weight of public resistance or even anger. Confronting our own misdeeds and flaws, that entails some difficult work. As does the call to live by different values

than the world's values and to resist the cultural messages which tie self-worth to money and status.

The Savior who God sends came not to make our lives easy but to make our lives meaningful and to transform us with love that we might know abundant life. But in order to claim that life, we have to let go of our grip on our false securities, our false gods, our false expectations of what we think will protect us and save us. We must let them die, and trust in the new life, the resurrected life, the Savior offers.

Even the Church must let go of its false expectations. There is hardly a church in America today that isn't struggling with the great societal shift regarding religious observance in our culture. With fewer and fewer people making church membership or attendance a priority, churches are declining and going out of business. And in this moment of existential crisis, church folks think they know what will save them: more butts in the pews and more bucks in the plates. And the most sought after prize of all, the greatest triumph any church can score these days: young families. Yes, *that's* it, we tell ourselves. Young families will save us. And so the church's mission for salvation becomes centered around church growth.

Like that first Palm Sunday crowd, we are looking for the wrong kind of savior. The Savior who enters our lives has something much, much grander and important in mind for you and for me and for our congregations. God sends the Savior that you and I might know we are unconditionally loved and cherished beyond measure. And then God tells us to get about the business of doing the saving work of the Savior. Which begins when we followers of Jesus ask ourselves, who around us needs saving? Who is hurting? Who is being treated unjustly? Who is afraid? Who is vulnerable to oppressive powers? Who is hungry? Who is grieving? Who is overcome with despair? Salvation does not come to our churches from the increase in church

membership numbers but through joining in the life-giving work of the Savior for as long as we have breath. This is what will save us even if membership numbers dwindle and our congregations are forced to close their doors. The question our churches must face is whether we trust the Resurrection enough to let the Church in its present form die?

Today we shout “hosanna,” save us! We need a savior. You need one. I need one. Our churches and communities need one. Our broken and hurting world needs one. We need a Savior to rescue us from the precarious existence we lead amid the array of life-depleting forces in our lives and in our world. We need a Savior to show us and guide us on a different path, a path of genuine life. And God answers our prayers—not with the savior we may always want, but with the Savior we so desperately need.