

Palm Sunday

God Save the People

[RCL] Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; John 12:20-36

*“When wilt thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
Not kings and lords, but nations,
Not thrones and crowns, but men...
God save the people.”*

Famous words, not from the Gospel of John, but from the Stephen Schwartz musical, *Godspell*.

Palm Sunday.

It is the moment of the church year most frequently documented in musical theatre, and with good reason.

It is flashy, it has its own special soundtrack, and everyone gets a prop: a branch to wave.

It would seem, however, that in the text claiming to describe Jesus' actual ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, there were no musical numbers at all.

There was a lot of shouting. There were a lot of symbols. And there were people crowded around, demanding things, hoping for more, for better, for peace. A crowd invests their tired hope in this controversial rabbi riding into town on a donkey, and they show up for him with shouting, symbols, and loud support.

It was much less like a musical number and much more like a protest. The authorities might have even called it a riot.

Hosanna!

God save the people.

We find ourselves today in John 12, right after Mary anoints Jesus and some religious leaders plot to kill him. So much has already happened in John's Gospel, and yet, the true action has yet to take place. John 1 through John 12 is known to scholars as the "Book of Signs," when Jesus performs miracles and gives teachings and surprises everyone with what he does, culminating in his most rabble-rousing miracle of all: raising Lazarus from the dead.

That miracle changed everything. From then on, Jesus was officially making too much of a ruckus. Word was spreading. Rome, the oppressing empire, was watching.

Something had to be done about this rebellious rabbi that everyone was following.

We are at a hinge point in every sense of the term. We are at a hinge point in the Gospel of John, between John's "Book of Signs" and what would become known as the "Book of Glory".

We are at a hinge point liturgically, teetering between Lent and Holy Week and ready to plunge into our yearly remembrance of Jesus' last days before his crucifixion.

We are also at a hinge point societally. It always seems that we are at a hinge point societally, because we never quite know when we are on the verge of a day that changes everything.

This is also where the first observers of Palm Sunday found themselves. They lived in a land occupied by all of the oppressive power of Rome. Many of the occupants of the land were Jewish, a minority religion in the Roman Empire. Like human beings from ancient times right up until today, what they wanted most was to live their lives, observe their faith, care for their families, and make a living. But as often happens to humans, events beyond their control — like Rome conquering their land — affected their ability to do these things.

Some in Israel wanted to rebel against Rome, and they had, and they would do so again in the future. Others preferred to keep their heads down and try to live their lives as peacefully as possible. And most people were somewhere in between the extremes. They weren't satisfied with the way things were going at all, but they also weren't about to take up arms against the greatest military power in the world at the time.

Enter Jesus, the offbeat rabbi that they say brought a man back from the dead.

Could he be the one that would save them?

Word begins to spread that he's coming to Jerusalem. Someone spots him. They tell others. Soon, he's riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. A horse would have been a clear statement that he was a military leader. But a donkey? Humble. Peaceful.

Others assemble. John is the only Gospel to note that the crowd had palm branches. Palm branches are a Near Eastern symbol of many things, among them victory, eternal life, peace.

God save the people.

Soon, there is a huge crowd, with people pushing, craning to see the famous rabbi that they say brought a man back who had been dead for days.

Could he be the one to save us?

In the verses that follow today's Gospel text, the religious leaders shake their heads in despair and sigh, "See, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" (John 12:19).

Two thousand years later, we still look for the one who will save the people. We put our hopes in all kinds of people, things, and programs. We yearn for the thing that will take us from difficulty to freedom, from sickness to health, and from death to life.

God, save the people.

Today, let us join the world in running after Jesus. Let us grip the palms in our hands and imagine what it must have been like to be there, to see him, to invest our tired hope in him.

At this hinge point in history in 2024, let us remember that we are not the first to fear, the first to suffer, the first to want better things for ourselves and our families. We are not the first to despair or the first to offer our tired hope up to the one who might save us.

Beloved, the story of Jesus is our story, and here, we get to live through it again together. Let us, just this once, forget that we know the ending. Let us invest our tired hope in the one who rides on a donkey. Let us dare to imagine that he might be the one to take us from death into life.

The story is being told once again. Let us lean into it, together.

Today, we grip our palms. From here, either individually or together, we will journey from this Jerusalem road to the upper room, where fears will be shared and feet will be washed and a meal will be broken and poured for us.

And then, as it always does, on Good Friday the worst will happen.

Hope is crushed. Love is laid quiet.

Beloved, forget for a moment that you know the ending. When love is laid quiet in our own lives, we allow ourselves to mourn that the worst has happened.

From the tomb, who knows where love and hope could take us?

God, save the people.

Love comes to us today riding on a donkey. Let us greet him with palms and songs. And then let us once again journey with him from death into life.

May we encounter the holy this week, and may we find our tired hope refreshed.

God, save the people.

Amen.