



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon March 27, 2021 “Church of Hosannas” Rev. David Jones

On Palm Sunday, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. This arrival in the city--Jesus on a donkey, a receiving crowd gathered, palms or leafy branches making his path--this is our usual focus. But it is interesting the way this lectionary reading is actually bookended by entries: the first entry is the big one, the famous one, into the city of Jerusalem. But there is a second entry, when Jesus enters the temple. This entry at the end of the passage can get overlooked amid the fanfare of the first.

When entering the city, Jesus plans every step, and his followers and the people, curious to see, carve out a path fit for royalty. This is a very well choreographed, carefully detailed entry--a demonstration. It is triumphal, but in all kinds of unlikely and subversive ways. The choice of the donkey, unriden and peaceful; the saddle made of cloaks; the pathway of natural leaves; the Hosannas, which are both a desperate plea to be saved and an overflowing relief that salvation has arrived...All these things carefully communicate, both to Jesus and to the people and to us today as readers, that a new king, a new sovereign, has come, and that the city's ways are not yet the ways of God.

Jesus has been walking everywhere up to this point in his ministry. Here, now, he deliberately chooses to ride this colt. It is the one who walks among the people--who is of the people, who serves the people--not Rome's appointed rulers, not the high priests, not even Caesar, who is the true king. All along he has ministered to people in the countryside knowing that is what love is, that that is what gentleness and companionship and healing and reconciliation and debt forgiveness *are*--the true power. The kingdom of God is among us in *these* things.

And it is time to let more of the world in on this deep truth. Every step, every choice, of this entry into Jerusalem, sends an implicit message to those whose power is against these things--whose power is in underpaying and overworking their employees, whose power is in prejudice against Samaritans and women, whose power is in threatening to ostracize Mary and Joseph for a pregnancy out of wedlock, whose power is in denying them a room at the inn. These two sources of power--one true and on the march, one false and on guard--cannot co-exist. And so this public demonstration is inevitable.

Jesus teaches that we cannot hide our light from the world, anymore than a lamp could light a home under a bushel basket. No more can Jesus hide the true power if the people's desperate prayers are to be answered, and if the false power of Rome, that makes the people desperate, is to be broken. At some point, true power, to fulfill its purpose, will have to confront and provoke false power, and bring it out into the open.

Now, Jesus entering the Temple, the often overlooked second entry that brings this passage to a close, provides some clues as to how those benefiting from the current order of things will soon respond. Unlike at the gates of the city where all the people can gather freely, at the temple there is no greeting for this devout and passionate rabbi. Of course we wouldn't expect the same complicated shouting of people in the streets in a place of worship, but the silence is stunning. There is no one to greet this fellow teacher, this fellow pilgrim. But why would there be? Rome and its appointed rulers are not in the business of empowering religious leaders who champion the causes of the people. (The lack of hospitality for Jesus, the silence at the temple, reminds me of the lack of hospitality that Martin Luther King received and described in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail to his fellow Christian clergy, who had been disparaging his ministry).

Jesus is unbothered by the silence. It's late, he doesn't linger. In the Gospel according to Mark, the episode of the 'cleansing of the temple' we have already read in Lent--when Jesus causes an uproar and some mayhem overturning the table of the moneychangers--that will come next, on the day after Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem for Passover. After all, you cannot cleanse a temple in silence--or transform a city in secret.

This is our second Palm Sunday and Holy Week in Covid. Last year I found myself dwelling on the famous and exciting *first* entry in this passage, the one into Jerusalem. I found myself identifying very strongly with those in the crowd at the city gates, because our Hosannas last year were so clearly both prayers of grief and desperate pleas of hope. We all remember that time, a year ago; how scary it was, how heartbreaking it was. And we didn't know at that point what May would bring, in Minneapolis; what the summer in this country would witness, from vigils on Bridge Street in Shelburne Falls to rebellions in every major city in America. We also didn't know how many of our congregants and friends of our church we would lose, or how many of us would have to say goodbye over a phone or through a screen--or miss getting the chance to say goodbye at all. We never imagined we'd go a year without gathering in our sanctuary to pray and sing as one.

We didn't know last Easter how many people in our community would lose their jobs, or receive little to no hazard pay for dangerous work. We didn't know that those who have relied on community support for keeping homes warm through our cold winters would actually have less support than in years past. Despite the Hosannas of the people all across this country and right here where we live and work and worship--despite prayers for help and shouts of desperate hope--too much of our government, regardless of Party, and too many of our banks and corporations, too many HR departments and union halls, have remained silent. The prayers of joy and concern of the people of Jerusalem, right here in Franklin County, continue to go unanswered by our rulers today. Occasionally something does get done, some action gets taken; we're not in a position to refuse a relief check, as individuals or as a church. But still we know the relief is only temporary.

On *this* Palm Sunday, with a year of particularly difficult ministry behind us all, I find myself dwelling on the silence of the second entry, this silence in our country in response to our hosannas. And, as I dwell on this, I dwell on something else: I am very *proud* to be a minister of *this* church, and to become a member of *this* church today, because *we* have not been silent.

Our members kept up the vigils at Bridge Street long after the news media fell silent. Our members have reached across the hills to Eastern Kentucky, from one hilltown to another, undeterred by the divisiveness of that same news media. Our members have spoken up and drawn lines at work to protect themselves and their coworkers and students. Our care to each other has only increased and deepened. The silence of our government and our workplaces have continued to be overcome by volunteers and clients of the Food Pantry and the Share the Warmth committee. We have all worked tirelessly to hold our church close and together. And as a congregation, and as a community, we not only met a challenge to raise money for those who could use a hand up in this economy that keeps pushing them down, we *easily* exceeded our goal. I remember when we said, 'let's see if we can get a fund of \$5000 to get resources to those who need them,' I worried that was just too tall of an order in a year when our budget was going to be squeezed so tightly. But I had too little faith in us.

This is what *membership in* a church and *friendship to* a church should mean. Like the disciples who ran ahead to get Jesus a colt so that he could send a royal message to the rulers of Jerusalem and Rome, our members and our friends are sending a royal message to those in power: the abundance of God is for the people of Franklin County too.

We don't know what will come next in this year ahead, but the members and friends of this church--new or longstanding--*know* to shout hosannas when the power of love is at the gates. I want to thank all of you for welcoming us (in a few minutes) as members of this church this morning, because this membership will be proof, for our spirit and body, that we belong in the noisy crowd of the people.

Thank you. And amen!