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March 24, 2024, Palm  
Sunday

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

The Messiah Covenant

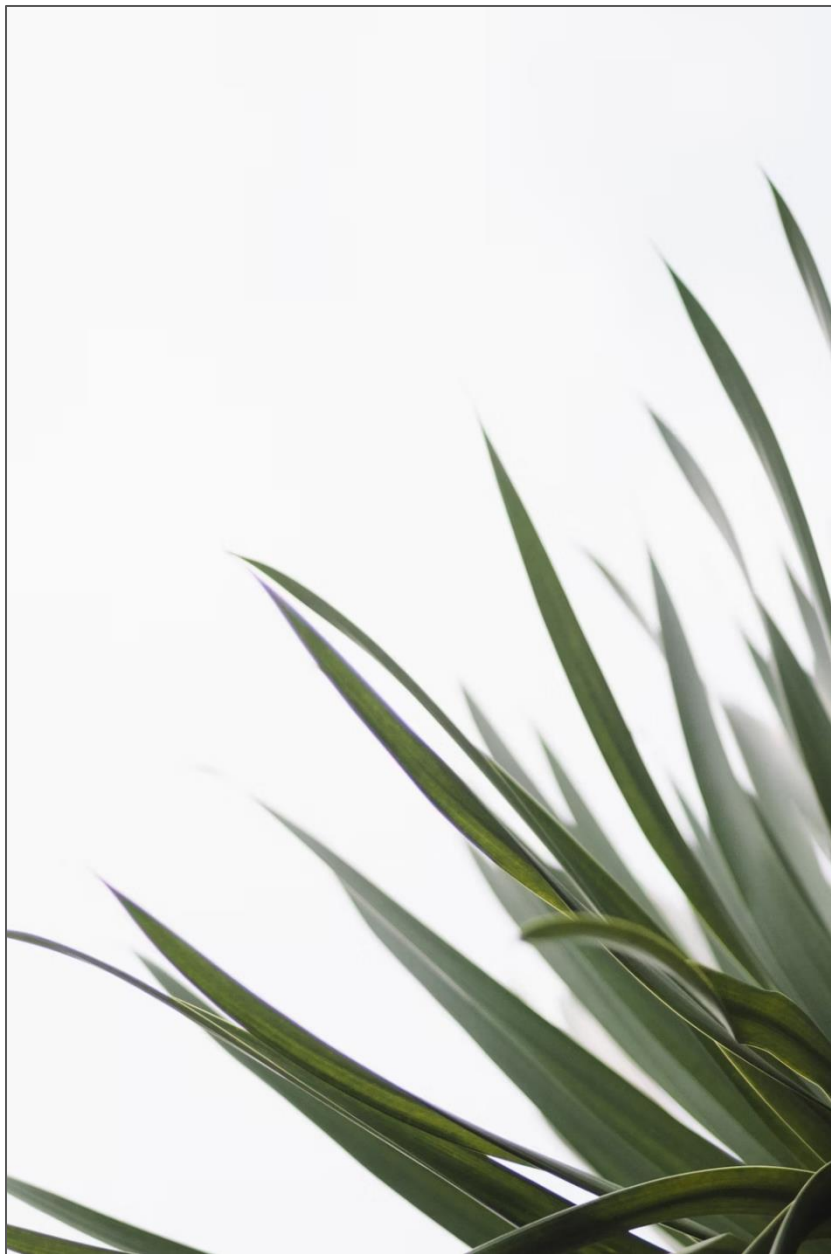
*Prayer: Holy God, sometimes life feels like a parade rushing by as we stand on the sidelines and try not to miss it! There are hundreds of things that catch our eye, but the thing we fear missing the most is you. So slow down the speed of this parade. Paint the colors of this world a little brighter. And dance through the words in our scripture passage until it is impossible for us to miss your presence with us here....*

Today I'm preaching on texts which refer to music, history, and prophecy. Palm Sunday is the day when everything all comes together. Before it all falls apart. Easter is a mystery; Palm Sunday is a revelation. The Messiah covenant holds it all together.

I'm preaching on a Psalm today. But not just any psalm, the psalm that we hear quoted, during Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem which you heard Jeff read at the beginning of the service. The people were singing as Jesus entered the city. Today this Psalm is part of a set group of Psalms 113-118 called the Hallel or "Hallelujah" psalms which are sung together as part of the Passover seder at the end of the meal. We have the words but not the tune.

The other thing to bear in mind is that there is more than one triumphal entry into Jerusalem in this era. And Jesus' entry is not like any of the other ones. Jesus' entry is not even counted in Jerusalem's history, because Jesus is not conquering anyone as he rides in. Unless of course he is in their hearts. Inhabiting their hope, animating their courage.

Friends, during its long history, Jerusalem has been attacked 52 times, captured, and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times, and destroyed twice (nothing left standing – just a few



foundation stones). The oldest part of the city was settled in the 4th millennium BCE, that's before the early Bronze age. You may remember Melchizedek from last week's sermon; Jerusalem is one of the oldest cities in the world and one of the most hotly contested. Still.

And then comes Jesus who grew up in nearby Nazareth. Who has been coming regularly with his family for the sacrifices at the Temple. Who has been wandering in the environs with his band of disciples and hangers on. He has turned water into wine, healed lepers, talked with a Samaritan woman, called an unlikely group of disciples, debated the issues of the day with the local authorities, shared a simple meal of loaves and fishes with thousands. This is not subversive activity, or is it?

In Jesus' public entrance, there are similarities to other political leaders... and important differences.

John Dominic Crossan has made the case that while many of our Bibles caption this section "The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem" at the time it was perceived by those who witnessed it as just the opposite of a *triumphal entry*. He says: "it was actually an anti-triumphal entry, a calculated alternative to imperial normalcy... (which) created a very deliberate contrast with how Alexander of Macedon had (just) entered cities like Tyre and Gaza after devastating sieges... (and)... especially, with how (Alexander) had entered Jerusalem when it finally decided not to resist but to submit and throw open its gates to the conqueror." [3]

The average citizen endured some level of trauma each time the city was conquered, and a new victor came in. Remember these streets are not paved in this era, the new ruler comes in with a show of force: the chariots are rolling behind war horses, which are essentially draft horses – which are huge, they creak, their brakes aren't very good. They're dangerous to be around. Mounted cavalry come in, armored foot soldiers and mercenaries marching in formation. They often took food from the houses as they came in, demanded money, were deafeningly noisy, sometimes drunk, and made a mess and mayhem.

The dust. The dust alone. These streets are not paved and if it was dry you'd have a dust cloud so large it hung over the city for days. You could see them coming before they got to the city, because of the dust they created. If you saw them coming, you would run home as fast as you could, grab your children and household members, close your windows and doors, roll up your rugs and use them to block out any crevice where the dust might come in. While the "triumphal" parade rattled by, you would hide indoors with your people. Otherwise, a considerable layer of dust would cover everything. If it was rainy, it was mud, not dust, that was everywhere. You'd need to do something to protect your livestock also – they need to be able to breathe – minimally. Likely they brought them into their homes. Put blankets over them – anything.

By contrast, in the manner of his entry – a peaceful, nonthreatening one – Jesus is subversive in the best way possible. Rather than running away from his procession the people ran towards him. Children are safe in his presence; he is riding on a peaceful animal who would be a familiar sight to everyone. He is:

Lamprooning the triumphal entry of the political conqueror, a mockery of Pilate, Herod, and those who seize power. Jesus is mocking the type of power they flex, and he is fulfilling prophecy, the one about the Messiah.

Psalm 118 is on their lips in Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem:

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

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

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

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

*This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

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

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.*

Political threat? Open to me the gates of righteousness? As he enters the gates of Jerusalem. Of course, Pilate will have mixed feelings about the presence of this man in Jerusalem.

Imagine Jesus coming into Jerusalem not on a war horse but riding a donkey. It is ridiculous. Jesus is not a political threat; Jesus is hilarious. He is the harbinger of a new world order. The prince of peace, they called him. King of kings. The man of sorrows. The Messiah of God.

Jesus has given us the example of a vulnerable Messiah. This does nothing to prevent authorities from a variety of perspectives, ancient and contemporary, from seeking to read their own ideas into his actions and to seek to use Jesus' work as a kind of cover for their own agendas. This has remained a problem for Jesus' followers as it was for Jesus himself in the year 33. When faith enters the political sphere, it can quickly become co-opted for other purposes. Yet, Jesus entered Jerusalem willingly, and freely engaged the authorities of his day.

That means our humility is important, our vulnerability is part of how we reflect God's image, it means we can be betrayed, it means we are mortal, we can get sick – we can catch covid and anything else that comes along, and it means we are both perfect for each other, and we chronically disappoint one another. It means that love will overcome; even death cannot divide us. It means that even if we are silenced the very stones will cry out. It means that God uses the humble, ordinary things for sacred purposes. This is the promised covenant about the Messiah, the Messiah no one was expecting. The Messiah who is perfect for us.

For those of you with eyes to see. Jesus came in peace...