

April 9, 2017 (Palm Sunday – Journey)

(Take bible with me)

TEXT: Matthew 21:1–11

TITLE: A Rich Tapestry of Deeper Meanings

My grandparents traveled in the Southwest states, I believe, back in the 1930s. They purchased some Native American rugs a couple of which I've brought today. I don't know the story behind the weavings, but I can well imagine that they came from a simpler age—a time when dyes came only from natural sources and yarn came from spinning wheels, not JoAnn Fabrics. There is an attention to detail that I love and I'm grateful they were handed down to me. On a related note, I read a book once about the special quilts stitched together by slaves in the Carolinas, whose very designs were intended to help anyone who was hoping to flee north on the Underground Railroad. Sometimes a particular quilt would be set out to dry that also signaled that people were planning to escape that night. Other quilts even had subtle maps of rivers and pathways to follow worked into the literal stitches used to hold the quilt pieces together.

I mention these Native American and African American creations because it ties into a phrase a friend of mine used to say whenever she was confronted by a particularly complex situation or someone with a quirky personality who just didn't fit in. She would just laugh and say, "Ah well, it's all part of the rich tapestry of life"—a phrase I regularly take to heart working in a Presbyterian church like ours. As Presbyterians who believe in a God whose providential care is present all the days of our life, and as individuals who daily deal with a confusing and crazy world around us, it's good to keep our eyes on the big picture—to walk by faith and trust that somehow everything that happens is simply part of the rich tapestry of our lives.

Our theme for this month is the word "Disruption" and today is Palm Sunday. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem long ago was a disruptive act on many levels. It involved a rabbi from a small Galilean village, who had surprisingly grown in fame over a few years and entered into the capital city riding on a donkey and being praised by palm-branch waving crowds of people as if he were a king, the heir to the throne of King David. Roman officials looking down from their tower strongholds may well have seen this fuss over Jesus, shaken their heads, and said, "Well, I suppose this is all just part of the rich tapestry of life." And honestly, that is a very true sentiment. Let's take some time to unravel the various threads of this story to better appreciate the big picture of Palm Sunday.

First, let's start with some Palm Sunday vocabulary. In the Matthew passage we read, the crowd around Jesus shouted out two phrases: *Hosanna to the Son of David!* and *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!* Those words are mostly part of a quote from Psalm 118. First, there are these words from vs. 24: *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.* (That's a phrase we often say ourselves in worship as a call and response.)

Next comes Vs. 25: *Save us, we beseech you, O Lord; give us success.* In Hebrew, the word for “save us” is “Hosanna.” There’s a story in II Samuel about a poor widow who went to plead her special case before King David, and when she reached him, she fell down saying “Hosanna, help me, O King.” So according to Psalm 118, the Lord who makes each new day is also the one to whom we pray “Hosanna, save us” in times of trial.

Ps. 118:26 then says this: *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* This phrase was used by pilgrims who used to travel to Jerusalem for any of the high festival days. As they approached Jerusalem, there were specific psalms they were supposed to recite out loud which said things like this: Psalm 121: *I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.* Or Psalm 122: *I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.”* Or Psalm 118:26, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” So taken together, we have three threads of meaning in Psalm 118—thanksgiving to God who is the Lord of every day, who is the Lord who saves us, and the Lord who blesses all those who travel to a place of prayer to worship the Lord our God.

Now, on Palm Sunday, another layer of meaning was woven into this ancient tapestry of Jewish faith. Instead of reciting the psalms heavenward as people walked into the capital city, on this day they stopped and said all those words in reference to one particular person—this Galilean teacher named Jesus riding on a donkey before them. In biblical times, most people walked on foot into walled cities. The gates were not huge; the cobblestone or dirt streets were crowded, especially during festivals; so unless you were old and infirm and needed to ride, it was just easier in that day and age to walk. So if someone did come riding into the city, they were usually someone of great importance—a general or Roman governor for the region. They would enter with pomp and circumstance, often on a stallion or other war horse, likely accompanied by a military honor guard.

Yet on Palm Sunday, a robed prophet named Jesus entered riding on a donkey. His procession was lauded by a large crowd waving branches and shouting loud cheers, so much so that it was reported that the entire city was in turmoil. And to the usual Psalm 118 phrases of “Hosanna, save us” and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” another phrase was added that wasn’t in Psalm 118: *Son of David.* Now everyone’s ears perked up, especially the religious leaders and the Roman government officials, for the addition of “Son of David” into the tapestry of words being spoken that day meant Jesus was being called the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior of the people. Suddenly the various threads of the tapestry woven that day came together to present a startling and perhaps troubling picture: for if this Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, it would change everything in their world. It would change life in the temple, change powers associated with the government, change everything.

I don't know what to do with these Indian blankets. They're lovely—and I have a third one hanging on a wall in our house. But if I took them to an art expert and she told me they were valuable examples of Native American handiwork worth thousands of dollars, I suppose I would see them in a different light. I would likely do something besides simply keep them on a shelf in my closet. I might sell them or donate them to a museum. It would change how I understood them.

So, in the same way, what do you plan to do with the Palm Sunday story – what is your response to the rich layers of meaning sewn together in the words in this familiar passage? If you had been a pilgrim traveling to Jerusalem 2000 years ago and this palm-branch waving crowd walked past you, would you have watched it out of curiosity but then generally ignored it, focused on your own agenda and your own little world? Would you have been intrigued by all this fuss over a simple teacher from Galilee but kept your distance because you don't want to get involved and get in trouble with the authorities? Would you have taken time to notice the face of this Jesus as he passed by, and later felt a tinge of sadness when you heard about his arrest and death by crucifixion outside the city walls? Would you have finished up your temple obligations and headed back out of Jerusalem wherever your home might be, untouched by any of these peculiar events—these odd threads in the larger tapestry of life around you?

Here's why I'm asking this. There is nothing fundamentally different between Palm Sunday in 33 A.D. and Palm Sunday in 2017. This is still the day that the Lord has made—we are still to rejoice and be glad in it. Literally. We are to be aware of God who is as close to us now as God was in Christ Jesus 2000 years ago. Second, we still cry “Hosanna, save me” to the Lord who knows our needs before a word is even on our lips. But to say “Save us” about something means our eyes are open and our hearts are moved to seek healing, justice and grace for those in need. Roman oppression—Syrian chemical weapons—domestic violence—opioid abuse and death—racism, laws trying to legislate sexual identity in terms of bathroom policies, elected officials more beholden to special interests than their own constituencies—all those things merit our attention, fill our hearts with turmoil, and evoke our sincere prayers today for God's intercession through us and in spite of us.

And lastly, Jesus still passes by as the Son of David, the Savior, Prince of Peace, and Lord of all nations. On that Sunday long ago, he rode into the city on a donkey instead of walking in like all the other pilgrims. That act set him apart—just as did the fact that later, when he did walk out the city gate, it was carrying a cross, going to die on behalf of the people he'd seen and heard their shouts of praise only days before. Soon he would rise from the dead and return to the city, appearing in different places—in the cemetery to Mary Magdalene, in the upper room to the disciples, along the seashore to Peter and the rest, and on the road to Damascus to the apostle Paul. Walking, riding, eating, speaking—none of those details mattered now. All that was important was that the One who was dead was now alive and in our midst.

We are still weaving the rich tapestry of life. Or more precisely, God is fully aware of the design being created by the events sewn into the world's fabric—whether from long ago in Israel or more recently when slaves escaped to freedom in South Carolina or when Native Americans completed rugs for tourists in New Mexico—or even today when you awoke and joined this group of worshipers at East Liberty Presbyterian Church as one small part of your Palm Sunday 2017.

Remember: everything you see has God's fingerprints on it. Everything around you is woven together as part of God's creation—sometimes wounded by sin and human folly, sometimes resplendent in glory pointing to the love of God made new every day. So look around you with eyes of faith. Christ passes by again this Palm Sunday—right here and now. Blessed is the One who has come, who comes today, and who will come again in the name, glory and power of the Lord. Thanks be to God!