

March 29, 2015 (Palm Sunday)

TEXT: John 12:12–19

TITLE: Saving Salvation: Now or Later?

To start this sermon, I want everyone to be mindful of your body and take a deep breath. Breathe in—feel your lungs expand—and now let it out. Trust me—you’ve been breathing ever since this worship service began. But for one moment, you remembered what it feels like to breathe and how important breathing is. Next exercise: Tomorrow is Monday. I want you to think of one thing you have to do tomorrow—go to work, get kids to school, clean the house, prepare a meal, visit a doctor—one thing. You just spent a moment in the future, thinking about tomorrow. But today is not Monday; it’s Sunday. You are in church now, part of a congregation worshipping the God known in Christ through the Holy Spirit. All of us exist in the present and yet we can think about the future. What we often forget—just like we forget to notice that we are breathing—is that there is a direct connection between today and tomorrow, between the Now and what comes Later. To put this in faith language, there is a direct connection between life now and a future eternal life. But if you want to know more about the life that is to come, you have to pay attention to the life that is happening right now.

W.H. Auden wrote a long poem about the days when Christmas is over, when the tree has been dismantled and the decorations are put back in their cardboard boxes and carried up to the attic. The children have to get ready for school; there are enough left-overs for the rest of the week, and the days are past, as he put it, in which we “attempted—quite unsuccessfully—to love all of our relatives.” Then comes this great line: (quote) “In the meantime there are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem from insignificance.”¹(end-quote) In the meantime, we remember that we breathe and one day we will stop breathing; we think about the Now in terms of the Later. We redeem the Time Being from insignificance with God’s help.

All four gospels describe Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. But John’s gospel tells the story from a different perspective from Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the first three gospels, the disciples find a young colt upon which Jesus can ride, so that he may enter the capital city as a king and Messiah, not triumphant on a tall war horse, but humble on a donkey. But in John’s gospel, the Palm Sunday parade comes after the raising of Lazarus from the dead; and many of the folks shouting “Hosanna” are praising this King of Israel whose lordship has less to do with earthly power and more to do with a power over life and death itself. That’s why there is a fascinating verse in the middle of the Palm Sunday passage: *His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him.* Jesus, the King praised on Palm Sunday, was not so much the King of earthly thrones, but a king only understood later through the Good Friday cross and the Easter empty tomb. He was a Messiah able to redeem the Time Being from insignificance. His present-moment parade would have far-reaching future significance. That’s why

the Pharisees' words were so prophetic: *There's nothing to be done. Look, the world has gone after him!*

It is not surprising that the One who was able to raise Lazarus from the dead would attract a crowd of followers anxious to stick close to him as he headed to the temple in Jerusalem. Anyone who can calm our fears about life and death is worth following. That makes Jesus a Savior. That's why his words and his example point the way to salvation. And there are two teachings about salvation we are to take away from Jesus' Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. First, it is because of our hope for the future that we act and struggle and work for justice today. Christian hope is not escapist hope. Christians do not close their eyes to the suffering of the world as they sing songs about the kingdom yet to come. That is a hollow piety and a cowardly spirituality. John's gospel is all about the incarnation—the Word of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Because Jesus was like us, we can never be indifferent to anyone else who is like us. Because we hope in a fulfilled life after death, we cannot be indifferent to suffering life before death.² Theologian Jürgen Moltmann has said, "Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."³

Sure, we can close our eyes to the suffering of this world. We can stay busy and distracted and do all we can not to think about our worries for today or tomorrow. Humorist Brian Andreas said, "My grandma used to plant tomato seedlings in tin cans from tomato sauce & puree & crushed tomatoes she got from the Italian restaurant by her house, but she always soaked the labels off first. She said, 'I don't want the seedlings to be anxious about the future.'" That type of avoidance can only go so far in this life. We take a breath—and remember how dependent we are on every breath and that one day we will breathe no more. We remember that we are fragile, as others are, and know that any life to come only makes sense if it builds on the joys and heals the wounds that were part of this earthly life. Christian hope for the future goads us into working for justice and healing today because we always compare what is happening now to what is to come in the future.

Jesus never wanted his disciples to remove themselves from this world. He never led them into the wilderness and closed them off from the messiness of this life. At the crucial moment of his ministry, Jesus got on a donkey and rode down the middle of the street into the heart of the busiest place in his world. Jesus entered through the Jerusalem city gate. He taught in the town square. He overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple. He openly welcomed non-Jews and foreigners. And at the Last Supper, he put on the apron of a servant and said, "As I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one other's feet." It is because of the promised future that we act now, openly and with compassion, love and justice. That is how the Time Being is redeemed from insignificance.

Second, heaven is not a private party but rather a group activity. Nowhere in scripture does it describe the life to come as if it were a time-share in paradise on a private beach. The bible talks about that future time as a great messianic banquet, a wedding feast, the communion of saints, the city of God, the heavenly body of Christ where all are one. The content of salvation is first-person plural, not first-person singular. For far too long, a heresy has been preached in lots of churches that salvation is only about individuals—you or you or you—accepting Jesus and getting their private ticket punched for an escalator ride to heaven. That is an egocentric definition of salvation. But salvation is not about you and you and you; it's about yinz—it's about us together—it's not egocentric but Christocentric, Christ-centered salvation that transforms all.

If Jesus had entered Jerusalem to accomplish an egocentric salvation, he would have opened an office on a side street, counseled with people individually and prayed over them, before sending them on their way to love God quietly and await the coming Kingdom. But instead Jesus knew well that we have to lose our egocentric life in order to save it. He rode into Jerusalem publicly, surrounded by crowds, calling them out, calling them together, and creating a new way of being altogether. The Pharisees muttered, "Look, the whole world is going after him." And a bit later, when Jesus publicly prayed over the gathered crowd, he told them, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (Jn 12:32). That's why Paul wrote that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female" (Gal 3:28). There is no longer rich, poor, black, white, young, old, strong or weak. This new being is not an ego-centered model of one + one + one. It is a qualitative change for all humanity—a new Oneness in Christ.

Here's how the musician in me understands this theological concept. I can play a single note on the piano and give it a name—like F or B flat or middle C. I can listen to it and enjoy it. I can repeat it or hold it, play it loud or soft. But it has no deeper meaning as a single note. If I put another note with it, it comes alive through that relationship. If I put two notes with it, it can become a major or minor chord. If I put it within a phrase, it now helps tell a story. It exists in relationship and is understood now through its relationships. Maybe it is a note of celebration, part of a fanfare that stirs the soul. Maybe it is part of a lament, a song of weeping and sorrow that must be expressed now until that time when we will weep no more. Our lives are single tones that can never be isolated from the rest of the notes in the song of life. That is how God, the heavenly composer, has organized life's score.

That's part of the reason why the disciples didn't fully understand what Palm Sunday was about right when it happened. They saw an individual—riding a donkey—touching individual lives—bringing healing and hope into the Time Being of their little world. But later they would see this one called the King of the Jews nailed to a cross with that same title written on a sign over his head. Witnessing his innocent death would shatter their old world-view, just as the

Easter resurrection would replace it with a new world-view. Easter changed everything and redeemed everything. They were no longer individuals and alone; they were children of God, united to Christ and to one another. They could never again be satisfied with the old way of doing things—having glimpsed a bit of heaven in Christ. The egocentric had given way to the Christocentric. The Time Being had been redeemed from insignificance once and for all and for all time.

Together in Christ is our greatest joy, our strongest hope, and our truest salvation. Thanks be to God.

¹ W. H. Auden, Collected Poems, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," pp. 399-400.

² Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 1991, p. 248.

³ Ibid.