

## **JESUS SAVES**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 9, 2017  
based on Zechariah 9:9-11, John 12:12-19***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—how the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” The cross is strange symbol for a faith that claims to pronounce good news. The cross does not strike us as so strange, because we are accustomed to it as a religious symbol, and we have made it pretty. The crosses in our churches are made out of gleaming brass or beautiful wood. But in the first century the cross was ugly. It was a means of gruesome execution, and so it was a symbol of disgrace, shame, weakness, pain, and death. Thus, as we noted in the first sermon in this series, when Christians tried to make the cross into a symbol of victory and good news, most people were thoroughly perplexed. As Paul said, “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to us who are being saved the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (I Corinthians 1:23-24) Obviously, the cross presents a direct challenge to ordinary human ideas about what victory and power and wisdom will look like; and this challenge comes into particular focus on Palm Sunday, the story of which we heard in the Scripture readings this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was greeted by great crowds of people. They had heard of his miracles, such as his raising Lazarus from the dead, and how he spoke with authority; everything about him seemed to point to him being the Messiah, and so they greeted him as a king.

It is true that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, which hardly seems an image of regal glory. Kings and emperors in the ancient world generally made triumphal entries in chariots, pulled by magnificent horses. But it was not so in Israel. Israel actually had a long tradition of kings coming to their coronation on a donkey; it was a tradition that went all the way back to David and Solomon, who entered Jerusalem on a mule. As it is reported in I Kings, at the time of Solomon’s coronation, “King David said, ‘Have my son Solomon ride on my own mule . . . and let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, ‘Long live King Solomon!’” (I Kings 1:33-34) In this fashion—with the kings of Israel coming to be crowned on a donkey or a mule—Israel declared that its kings were to be different from others in the ancient world; they were to reign in humility and obedience to God. Nevertheless, at the same time, the humble and obedient king of Israel could thoroughly smash the enemies of Israel, as David and Solomon did; and this is what the people on Palm Sunday were expecting of Jesus. The fact that he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, as previous kings of Israel had done, confirmed to the people that he was now the long-awaited king. They hailed him as king, saying, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel.” (John 12:13) And they waved palm branches in celebration.

This says a great deal about what sort of king they were expecting, because the palm branch had a particular significance at this time. A century before, the people of Israel had been an independent nation—before they were conquered by Rome—and the symbol of that independent Jewish nation, which was emblazoned on the nation's coins, was the palm branch. So waving a palm branch was like waving a flag. The people were expecting Jesus to throw off Roman rule, to return them to independence. They were looking to him to be a real king. That in fact is what the word Messiah means. It means “anointed one”—a term that was used for the kings of Israel. But the people at this point were not expecting just any king. The coming Messiah, they thought, would be the ultimate king; he would crush all the wicked people in the world and would reign in glory. The Messiah would thus be the quintessential picture of everything that we imagine power and victory to be.

But Jesus would turn that picture on its head. Rather than acting with vengeance and violence, Jesus would act in meekness and mercy. Rather than crushing the wicked, Jesus would sacrifice his life for the sake of sinners. Rather than destroying Rome, Jesus would let himself be crucified by the Romans on a cross.

Jesus completely redefines what power looks like. He expresses God's power through self-emptying service and redemptive love. It is the power not to crush one's enemies but to change them, not to destroy the wicked but to save them. It is the power finally to transform the world. And this in fact is what began to happen as Christians in the early centuries followed in the spirit and the way of Jesus. Early Christians were in a very lowly position in the empire and were often persecuted; yet by showing forth the gracious love of Christ they would ultimately bring the whole empire to Christian faith. In the early Middle Ages, Christian missionaries carried out the same pattern, as they fanned out into barbarian areas of northern Europe, armed only with the Bible. One of the most striking accounts in this regard is that of Boniface, who relentlessly took the gospel to northern Germanic tribes in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, until a group of unreceptive Frisians slew him. An ancient story says that when they came at him with swords and axes, he held up a book of Christian writings. They sliced through the book in the process of cutting him down; and you can still see the book today in the cathedral museum in Fulda, complete with the cuts made by the blades. Yet Boniface won the ultimate victory, as the barbarians subsequently came to Christ. There is real power in the self-giving love of Jesus.

Yet the temptation through the centuries has always been to fall back into typical human ways of thinking about power and victory. You can see it today, as people imagine that the way to win in life is through force or wealth or status; it's the thinking of the crowd on Palm Sunday, who were looking for a mighty and glorious king. They turned away from Jesus, when it became apparent during Holy Week that he was not the kind of winner they expected. Likewise today many people are not excited about Jesus, because he does not look like the one who is going to enable them to get ahead. The crowd prefers one who looks like a champion.

Yet Jesus provides precisely the victory that we need; and we have seen over the past weeks how Jesus does this through the cross. We need one who will truly connect with us in our broken condition, and Jesus on the cross fully joins in our weakness. We need one who will remove the burden of guilt that alienates us in our sinful condition from God; and Jesus does this by offering his life as a sacrifice for us, taking upon himself all the punishment that is due for our sin. We need one who will restore us into a right relationship with God; and Jesus does this by lifting up his life as a perfect offering on our behalf to God, thus lifting us up into fellowship with God. We need one who can move us to genuinely live our lives well; and Jesus does this by showing us the tremendous love of God and inspiring us to likewise reach out in love to the world. In all this Jesus brings victory—not the temporary earthly successes that so often pass for victory, but real eternal victory over the power of evil and death. Jesus on the cross opens up for humanity a whole new way of living and a whole new future—where we can dwell in the fullness of God’s grace and God’s peace.

It is interesting that the people who lined the streets of Jerusalem shouted, “Hosanna”—our version of the Hebrew phrase, hoshia-na, which was not simply a word of acclamation, but a plea. Hoshia-na means, “save us, we pray,” or “save us now.” By this the people in Jerusalem meant, “Save us from these lousy Romans.” It is this sort of salvation that people commonly have in mind; human beings want salvation from all those people or things or circumstances in the world that are causing trouble at the moment. But the salvation that Jesus brings is far more expansive. As we have seen in this sermon series, Jesus addresses the fundamental problem deep within us—the problem of sin, our spiritual brokenness and alienation from God, which brings us into all sorts of delusions and all sorts of conflicts and all sorts of trouble. In the face of sin, Jesus does what none of the false saviors in human history could ever do—he brings us out of our bondage to ruin and death into new life with God—and the way that he does this is through the cross. The cross thus demonstrates that the pathway to victory in life is quite different from what most people imagine. Victory is found through the redemptive love of Christ, poured out upon us from the cross. So we find real salvation as we take hold of that grace of Christ, which brings us into a right relationship with God, and which moves us finally to join with Christ in self-giving love for the world.

In the end, the people in Jerusalem were right to acclaim Jesus as King, for he is the King, and he was making a claim to be King as he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; the people just did not grasp what sort of king he is or how great a salvation he brings. It all would become clear in the cross, followed by the resurrection— that Jesus brings victory through transforming love, and we can share in that victory today, and live under the reign of Jesus now and forever. So as we sing our hosannas, may we lift our hearts truly to Christ the king, that his saving grace might flow through us.