

Character and Virtue: Humility

Matthew 21:1-16

April 2, 2023

Today is Palm Sunday. It is the liturgical day for parades and processions. We raise our palms in praise and our voices in acclamation:

Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!

The words come easily to our lips. The scene is not unfamiliar to us. We swim in a sea of spectacle. From the constant barrage of advertising, to major sporting events, to strategically sensationalist worship, to grandiose political rallies designed to evoke outrage, performative provocation is a constant in our lives. Such displays often blend religious symbol with the assurance (or threat) of human power. Yes, the Romans had their royal processions, their gladiator games, their public crucifixions. We, too, are enamored of spectacles that feature strength and domination. But this morning, if we look closely, we will see different set of symbols.

Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Jesus, a Galilean teacher whose ministry has taken place in the country, comes into Jerusalem on the eve of the Passover celebration. He does it in the way the prophet Zechariah had predicted the king would come: "humble and lowly; riding on a donkey." And those who saw it recognized the symbol. The moment of their redemption from the hated Roman Empire had finally arrived. And so, they tear the branches from trees and the coats from their backs, and they shout ancient words they heard in worship. Words of holy scripture.

Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!

That first word is a Hebrew phrase. Hosanna. Though we hear it as a joyful expression, it is better translated, "Save us." "Rescue us." This is no battle cry of victory. Listen. You can hear the desperation in their voices.

Hosanna.

Save us from the crushing weight of Roman dominion.

Rescue us from the constant threat of violence draped in Empire's power.

Save us from the pain of persecution.

Rescue us from the deafening silence of life in the shadows.

Save us! Rescue us!

Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!

To those who hold power in Jerusalem, those words convey an unmistakable threat. Matthew tells us that the whole city was shaken. We've heard that before. Herod and all of Jerusalem with him were shaken when a baby boy was born in Bethlehem.

The whole city was shaken. The disciples and the crowd are shouting their desperate hope. The city and its officials are grappling with political unrest. The religious leaders are huddled in fear, making malicious plans. And in Jerusalem, the power of God and the gods of power will meet head-on this week. Everyone knew it. Everyone knows it.

And so, they ask. They all ask. The crowd and the governor. The peasant and the powerful. The desperate and the fearful. They all ask the same question.

Who is this?

Well, it depends who you ask.

Some answer: *This is the Son of David*, a reference to the greatest king in Israel's history, victorious in battle, unrivaled in power. Israel at the zenith of its influence in the world. These observers see in Jesus the potential for another King David. They see a dramatic reversal of power, a new era of domination for those currently under the booted heel of Rome. King. Son of David.

Others that day have a different response. *This is the prophet from Nazareth*. Their words call to mind the seers who spoke words of judgment against evil rulers, who demanded repentance and change. Voices crying in the wilderness. And they see in Jesus the new prophetic voice to upend the established rule—one who would declare God's righteous anger and table-turning judgment. Jesus the prophet.

Both groups have good reasons for believing what they say. Both answers come from a place of deep despair in the way things are and a fading hope for renewal and redemption.

Son of David, powerful king.

Prophet from Nazareth, revolutionary hero.

Both answers are incomplete on this Palm Sunday.

If Jesus were simply a greater King David, he would steer that donkey all the way to the palace of Herod himself and give the king his eviction notice.

If Jesus were simply a wild-eyed prophet, his parade would have incited a revolt against the leaders of the city and directed God's wrath against all those who threatened to do him harm.

But Matthew does not record these events. They never happened.

Here is what did happen. Jesus rode into the holy city. He went, not to the houses of power, but to the house of prayer. He entered the temple. He cured disease. He welcomed the outcast. He forgave the sinner. He

proclaimed the power of God in words and deeds defined by love.

Oh, the authorities saw it. Oh, they heard the cries. And they knew what they had to do to preserve the power they held. What they needed was a spectacle. A public display. A Roman cross will do the trick.

Today, Matthew says, Jesus rides through the city. *Look, your king is coming to you, **humble**, riding a donkey.*

Today, Matthew says, it is the children who cry: *Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

It is the children who cry: *Save us! Rescue us!*

Friends, this week it has been hard for me to be anything other than the father of two boys. Two boys who got on the school bus every morning and came home again in the afternoon. Friends, this week it has been hard for me to hear anything other than the cries of children and the silence of the ones who cry no more.

Hosanna! That is what the children cried. Save us! Rescue us!

And what should we say to them? I've wondered. But then it hit me that they already know. More than you and me, they already know. They come home from kindergarten well-practiced in when to be quiet (no whispers, no talking), when to shout. They come home well-practiced in when to hide and where to run.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, he saw them. He couldn't miss them. They were lining the streets with their wide eyes and their waving branches and arms. He heard them. *Save us! Rescue us!*

But Jesus did not stop there because he was not interested in the pageantry of parades. He had no need of spectacle. He heard the children's voices.

And so, he overturned the tables of purely performative faith. He exposed the shameful idols of greed and the empty rituals wrapped in false

religiosity. He upended the expectations of divine and human power. He rejected the use of brute force, political oppression, and absolute authority.

Who is he? He told us who he was. He showed us who he is. *Look, your king is coming to you, **humble**, riding on a donkey.*

His is the power of humility.
His is the power of sacrifice.

The power of a cross that exposes our fixation on violence, our selfish narrow vision, our unwillingness to relinquish our many idols.

He saw them lining the streets. He heard their voices. *Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

Listen.

The kingdom of God upends the kingdom of Caesar. The kingdom of God unsettles the powerful who prey on the weak.

The kingdom of God belongs to those who bear crosses and wash feet.

We hear their voices too. We do. And because we do, we're going to need to change. We're going to need to humble ourselves. To bear crosses and wash one another's feet. To practice humility together.

We're going to need to pay attention to those who line the streets, those who are passed by or run over by the imperial procession. We're going to need to pay attention for the presence of God in ways that make us uncomfortable, or angry, or afraid. Because we're going to need to follow that procession beyond the streets of Jerusalem and the shouting voices, through the house of prayer and the upturned tables, to a hill called Golgotha.

This is the truth of the Gospel: that if the kingdom of God is to be found anywhere among us, it is to be found in the voices of those who cry out. *Hosanna.*

That is where Jesus will spend his week, teaching us, again, the meaning of humility. Showing us, again, sacrificial love as true power. Giving us courage to face our fear and build God's beloved community.

Today, a Galilean teacher rides into the holy city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, surrounded by those who shout: *Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

Who is this? This is God in flesh and blood.

And if we believe it, we will hear their voices. If we believe it, we will walk the streets of Jerusalem this week as the tide begins to turn against the prophet from Galilee. We will witness a trial full of corruption and injustice and abuse of power. We will climb a hill called Calvary where this story could have ended. Where the whole world thought it did end. If I'm honest, some days, I can't muster the faith to believe differently.

But, today, the children are crying, "Hosanna! Save us!"

Just wait. He will.