

A Broken Hallelujah

Menno Mennonite Church

March 28, 2021

Purpose: To move from the joy of the triumphal entry to the reality of Passion, examining our position within the movement

Message: No matter where we find ourselves in the crowd, we acknowledge the critical nature of what is happening before our eyes.

Passion: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (I will read): Mark 11:1-11 (secondary)

Synopsis: This is an odd day to be sure. After weeks of anticipation and deprivation (even just from Chocolate), we have arrived at the end of the journey. As is the case with all such things, we are often inclined to join in and relish the party atmosphere as Jesus comes to the holy city and simply move from one party to the next as we celebrate the ultimate triumph of Easter.

We know where this road leads, and that there are many steps between where we are and where we will be in the light of Easter morning. As much as we might hesitate to recognize ourselves there, we know that we too might be in the crowds of Good Friday, crying for the death of the one we now hail as king. Despite this, Jesus holds open the door for us to follow where he leads: not the path of power and privilege, but of true passion and hope.

Psalm 118 (NRSV)

¹O give thanks to the Lord,
for God is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!

²Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

²⁰This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.

²⁷The Lord is God, and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;

you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the Lord,
for God is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

This is not much of a way to launch a sermon, but I will go here anyway. I don't much care for the task of preaching on Palm Sunday. A bit of a first world problem, I'll grant you, but there it is all the same. It is not because the parade story has worn thin. We enjoy its well worn features, even if we are not 100 percent sure about the propriety of getting into the actions of waving branches and the rest. Sometimes we can strain to capture the excitement yet again of the breathlessness of "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus initiates the ride to the end, coming to the holy of holies of Jerusalem, fulfilling the gist of this Psalm, and electrifying all those who saw it. Never mind that a couple days from now there would be a profoundly different parade as Jesus makes his way with the cross out of town to the place of execution. Never mind that I find it likely that the very people lining the road hailing the conquering hero as the one who comes into the name of the Lord will be crying differently just several days later. It never hurts us to live these again to capture the meaning of these most critical and blessed of days, even if it is a bit of shadowed attempt, never quite living up to the real thing. We know this well, and many of us are well familiar with these mean streets of the festival Jerusalem.

But none of that is the real problem, however. What I never quite get past is that it becomes my job on this morning to come along and give the wettest blanket there is. That all of this goes away in the blink of an eye as soon as the political wind shifts as it is so want to do. What starts as triumphal parades in the streets leads on into political intrigue and state sponsored torture and execution. No amount of clever hermeneutics, language study or spiritual assessment can spin you past this story being what it is: the story of human insolence and certainty being leveled on God for simply being God. God comes and proclaims that the way things are need not remain, that humanity can aspire to more, can love more, can be more, and we, created in the image of the living God who comes turn around and try to kill God for being God. If there is a better way to kill a good time, I have yet to find it. God brings us God's best, his only begotten son, and we do our very worst and nail him to the cross. To be sure, I don't stand here the prosecutor naming the murder with motive, means and opportunity; Cornel Mustard in the Conservatory with the Candle Stick. But it is the truth: what begins here does not and will not end well. As much as we would prefer to jump from the adoring crowds of the entry to the disbelieving disciples of Easter without getting ourselves muddy in between, that is just not possible if we take the story seriously, and certainly not honoring of what happens. As easy as it

would be for us to place ourselves in the adoring crowds of the entry and excuse ourselves from the further engagements of the week, I don't think that is all that honest. Could it be that we too might go from "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" to "Crucify him" just like so many others? As much as I would rather just keep the party going, I am not sure that this is something that we can fairly get away with.

Time and again in the gospels, Jesus actively avoids the trappings of political power. He hushed those who would call him king. He mocked the tempter in the desert who offered him the power to make the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven without the messy bits in between. Every time power was in his grasp he would turn away—something I think is also part of the rhythm you see of Jesus engaging the crowds then drawing away. Just because something was not your way nor the way that was the way of the Lord does not mean it stopped being tempting. Now here he taking even timidly the kingly trappings of the leader and the crowds go wild. Here he is; the one after whom we have been waiting, the one who might make a difference to their dominated lives—both politically and religiously. They may or may not have called him messiah—out loud in any case—but that is definitely the direction in which they are heading. They would make him the king that they wanted, in the mold that they had in mind, a model that we sometimes still cling to. All power, all glory, all ease, and nothing else.

As of which is great until they hear what is truly on offer. It is not that it is bad, but it is complicated. A costly discipleship that calls people to love their neighbor as themselves, that the road of following is difficult and treacherous, that there would be challenges all along the way. It is not so much that the listening crowd found this bad; just not in the least what they wanted at all. They could not wrap their heads around the way of Christ, of instituting a kingdom based not on coercive force, but on the right living and right acting love of personal change. It was just too costly for and system of idealized power to maintain so they reject the possibility. And what a rejection it is. Unable to release their convicted ideals of a powerful earthly kingdom where none would be afraid because none would defy the Lord God Almighty, their anticipation turns to outrage, an emotion stoked by those seeking to solve a political problem beyond just the anticipated outcomes.

Because who wants to have their expectations challenged. It is easy to sit here from this vantage point where we know the story and say that we surely would have gotten it, that we would have been able to lay aside any misgivings that we might have had and jumped right into

this offer of a new kind of king and a new kind of kingdom. It is easy for me to assume that I would have had the spiritual insight to see things as they were with Jesus on the donkey, and would have fallen in lock step behind. To stand certain like Peter at the Last Supper and declare “surely not I Lord; I will never abandon you.” But I know better than that. I know human nature better than that. We are bonders with the stuff of life. Even the meaningless stuff and fluff of life grows on us. In graduate School I would enjoy myself by sitting in different places all the time. I helped me pay attention with a different view now and again. But many of my classmates took clear exception: I was not allowed to be in their spot (which of course made it WAY more fun for me to keep doing it). They had, despite no rule come to understand what ever random real estate they marked out as their own simply because it was the habit of the crowd. To have me disrupting that put some noses seriously out of joint. When we get ourselves that substantially put out over something this petty, how much harder was it, how much harder is it for us to give up our expectations and our hopes of what a king and kingdom should be in order to take Jesus up on his offer of a different kind of royalty? Our hopes, our passions, our fears, our expectations for the world are the very things that we cling to the most tightly, altering them only under the greatest of stress or only when we see without a doubt that they cannot be achieved in the way we wanted them to be. Then, only then do we contemplate adaptation to something else. Like doing the job the same way with the same tool that we have done it all of our lives, we need a pretty good shock to the system to even consider anything else.

Because this is who we are; change resistant beings who struggle to see beyond what is right here, right now, to consider the possibility that perhaps God might be up to something we could not expect. That leap was hard then, and it is hard now. I have no problem seeing myself not solely by the roadside hailing a savior, but also in a crowd condemning someone out of lack of comprehension. Not that this should make us proud by any means; but it is honest all the same. Humanity is like that. But at the end of it all, this week of passion is not about the human condition—not all of it in any case. It is about God and who God is even at the end of all things comes to us, embraces us, and calls us beyond what we are into what we can be, what we were created to be. That is good news indeed. But it is news that we can only really see, really comprehend when we come to terms with the seedier, more fickle side of the story at the same time. The crowd places their expectations of the back of the one on the colt, something which we still do today. The more we can see this, the more we can come to terms with the demands that

we do carry for God with us, the more clearly we can see what a risen Lord is all about in the weeks that follow.

When we look fully at the story we are living, and strip away as much of the same-old, same-old nature of the story that we recall this week, the more completely we can know it, live it and be moved by it. I challenge you to find some time this week and read one of the passion narratives all the way through. This isn't as hard as it may sound. Mark's version is only chapter 14 and 15. Read any Gospel any version you like. But as you do, read it with this in mind: Where am I in the action? Where do I stand? How do I identify? Where might I be fleeing along the way? What might I be anticipating a couple of days following the death of my teacher and friends? Be honest with yourself, not out of self-mutilation by any means, but out of realism finding the way of God with us before us and even inside us. Perhaps in the living, in the experiencing the anticipation and the shadow deeply, fully, we can better come to see the light when it does shine.

May we each come to know all that God is and what God is going as we walk again the lonesome road in these most important of days. Amen.