

Isaiah 50: 4-9
John 12: 12-16
March 29, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday

During the recent Lenten study of the Bible I invited the participants to reflect on the scripture in three ways: the Bible as God's story, the Bible as the human *experience of being part* of God's story and the role of Jesus in God's story. To this we might add, the role of Jesus in uniting God's story and our experience of God's story. I begin this way because the power of Holy Week is the result of the coming together—one might even say, collision, of these three streams of meaning.

We catch a glimpse of these three dimensions in the two scriptures quoted in the story. From Psalm 118 the crowd cries out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel! "In the name of..." indicates that Jesus comes at the direction of God and with God's authority.

The word "hosanna" has two dimensions of meaning. We hear it as a shout of praise and acclamation—which at the time it most certainly was. But the word in Hebrew also carries the meaning of "save!" as in, "save us!" As surely as the shout of "Hosanna!" was one of praise it was also one of great yearning and expectation. We are therefore in the midst of a crowd of people loudly acclaiming Jesus for what they *expect he will do*. He will save them. He will deliver them. He will be for the crowd the long awaited messiah who will bring God's rule to Israel and return Jerusalem to the days of King David. We therefore get a sense of what Jesus' arrival on a donkey means to the crowd. The emotions are running high and are a dangerous high test

blend hailing Jesus as king with the silent expectation and demand that he be the messiah they expect him to be. This highly flammable combination will explode five days later.

The second quotation comes from the prophet Zechariah. "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look! Your king is coming sitting on a donkey's colt!"

Listen to the passage from which this quotation comes:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and glorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow will be cut off, and he will command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea...to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope! Today I declare that that I will restore you double. For I have bent Judah as my bow and I have made Ephraim my arrow.

I propose that the same double edged message runs through this scripture as through the quotation from Psalm 118. Clearly, we hear the proclamation of the expected messiah. He comes as one victorious over his enemies and whose arrival promises victory over Israel's enemies. The king is clearly God's instrument in restoring the world order. The crowd would not be confused by Jesus' arriving on a donkey. The donkey was not understood to be the lowly beast of burden that we think of. In the book of Judges we read of princes riding on donkeys. Most tellingly, in the book of Genesis, Jacob blesses Judah, from whom the scepter of kingship will not depart, as "binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine." Notice the close connection with Zechariah!

Elizabeth Achtemeier in her commentary on this passage states that the humility of the king in Zechariah does not come from the donkey. Instead it comes from another meaning of

the Hebrew word, translated “victorious” which is “*delivered*”. In short, the *humility* of the king comes from his deep awareness that *God* has delivered him from his enemies. It is *God* who has been victorious. The true messiah will be in right relationship with God and through his humble leadership will restore Israel and, indeed all the world to the peace that comes from submitting to God.

Palm Sunday thus affirms the intention and direction of God’s story—to restore humanity and the world to the original relationships which existed before Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sought to be “like God.” The messiah will be one who lives in perfect dependence of God who has delivered him and who will inspire such trust by his leadership that first Israel and then the world will come to this saving relationship with the Creator of the universe.

Yet we also witness the deep pain and need in the crowd who hail Jesus. They have not been to therapy or spiritual direction such that they can separate out their mixed motives. Like most of us, they are filled with an intense and hard to differentiate mix of hope and fear, excitement and dread, joy and expectation. They are not thinking of the big picture of God’s story of salvation. They are thinking of themselves, their families, the challenge of living, the frequent sorrow and disappointment of life. They want someone to right the wrongs and restore justice and to heal their troubled souls. Their question is very much the same as John the Baptist and his disciples: “Are you the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

On this day the question is answered. Jesus is the King! Jesus is the messiah. Yet in a few short days the crowds will become disillusioned. Having lifted Jesus so high they will tear him down and demand that he be lifted up again, this time of a cross.

As he moves toward the gates of the city with the cheers of the crowd ringing in his ears, the palms waving and the cloaks falling before him on the road, Jesus knows that the crowd is not wrong. *He is* the messiah. He receives their acclaim even though he knows that they do not understand what is happening. Indeed as a human being he feels the deep and ancient yearning for healing and deliverance from the brokenness of sin. He feels their hope. He also knows the tragic misunderstanding that will so soon lead to his death. As John says of Jesus regarding his disciples, and which on this day embraced the crowd, "He loved them until the end." His love for the crowd was not conditional on their getting it right.

It is Jesus' role in God's story to persevere through the tragic misunderstanding of the crowd. As he moves through the clamoring crowd he recognizes the people for who they are—sheep without a shepherd. He knows that the real shepherd will not seek to make them happy, meet all their needs or allay their fears. The true shepherd will not give them certainty or worldly security. Yet in a way that he will never be able to express, *Jesus understands*. In a very real sense Jesus carries the fears and yearnings of the crowd. He receives the pain and hope; he breathes it in so that the cares of the world saturate his soul. On this day it is terribly clear that in Jesus the divine and human worlds are one world. Which part of Jesus is human and which is divine? I doubt that Jesus knew.

But he did know this: There is a point past which the human world cannot go. There is a point when the merely human world comes to an end. What separated Jesus from his fellow humans was the knowledge that he had to go where they could not. His path led to the cross. Jesus trusted that his heavenly Father would lead him past the cross. But what happened is a tale for another day. Amen.