First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

4/2/23

A City in Turmoil

Matthew 21:1-11

**21**When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2**saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. **3**If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”[a] **4**This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: **5** “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” **6**The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; **7**they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. **8**A very large crowd[b] spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9**The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

**10**When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” **11**The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

When I was living in Palm Springs, it wasn’t at all unusual to see celebrities out and about, at local restaurants, bars or even grocery stores. I mean famous people have to eat too, right? Quite a few well-known people either retire to Palm Springs, or have second homes there, and I would routinely run into Carol Channing at Costco, or Barry Manilow at the local watering hole. After a while, it just became the norm. By the way, both Ms. Channing and Mr. Manilow were extremely kind and gracious when approached by star struck fans, who were usually tourists, and I’m happy to report that they both acted in a manner that mirrored their public personages.

I remember the first time I met Barry Manilow in person. It was a Friday night and my favorite bar was packed. When he walked into the room, I thought he looked familiar and I asked the bartender who’s that? Well, the bartender, who was a good friend, looked at me like I had just fallen off the turnip truck and said that’s Barry Manilow, you idiot! Do you want to meet him? Well, duh I shot back! I mean, really, who’s going to pass up the chance to meet one of their all-time favorite celebrities! Huge fan-boy moment for me! I’ll admit that when we were introduced, I couldn’t shut up, I babbled on and on and I made a complete fool of myself. Mr. Manilow took it all in stride and let me gush for a few moments before he moved on. To this day, I cherish that memory and am grateful for the kindness shown to me.

As I was studying the Matthew reading for today, and reacquainting myself with this very familiar account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, I was struck by a few similarities between my memory and this all-important event we celebrate today.

By this time, in the narrative of Jesus’ ministry, he had become a major celebrity. The crowd that accompanies him into Jerusalem, that morning, was filled with adoring fans who wanted nothing more than to catch a glimpse of this celebrity prophet from Nazareth. His fame was so great, in fact, that he had become a major threat to the religious and political powers and they were conspiring to assassinate him. So, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy found in Zechariah 9:9, and amidst a huge crowd of people, it must have been very frightening for those in authority.

Now, the regular population of the Holy City during Jesus’ day, was approximately 40,000 full time residents, which would have made Jerusalem a major world city, at that time. It’s estimated that for major festivals, such as Passover, that number could swell to somewhere close to 200,000 people. So, not only were the authorities dealing with a fivefold increase in the number of people, they also had to contend with the Roman occupation. The potential for riots and all sorts of violence, was very real, and Pilate had come to the city with a full army, armed and prepared for anything. Jesus’ presence was probably the last thing these harried public servants wanted to deal with.

I think it’s important to note here, that Jesus didn’t have to go to Jerusalem. We all know what’s about to happen and so did he. He went, because he was obedient to God will and because he was an observant Jew. It was Passover, after all, and observant Jews from all over the known world had gathered in Jerusalem to commemorate one of the most important events in Jewish history.

So, Jesus rides into Jerusalem in the middle of, as verse 8 puts it, a very large crowd. The crowd is shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Now, the word “Hosanna,” translates into the phrase “Save us,” which is significant, because the people of occupied Israel expected Jesus to declare himself King and lead a revolt to overthrow the oppressive Roman regime. And on this particular day, that could have very well been the outcome. But, as we all know, that was never the plan.

What happens next is often left out of the Lectionary reading for Palm Sunday, depending on which version we look at, but it’s a significant part of the story. After his triumphal entry into the Holy City, Jesus goes to straight to the Temple and we hear the account of tables being overturned and money changers being driven out. It’s the only place in recorded scripture, where Jesus shows the very real human emotion of anger.

The significance of this event, lies in the fact that in a few short hours, Jesus has managed to once again upset not only the Romans, who were fearful of losing their political power, but also the Jewish religious leaders who were fearful of losing their grip on the spiritual lives of the people, as well as the livelihood provided by the sale of sacrificial animals. It really was the last straw and the die was cast.

The crowds, too, would be upset, because it wouldn’t take long for the realization to sink in that Jesus wasn’t going to declare himself King, or end the occupation, and many of the same people who shouted “Hosanna” on Sunday, would be the same who shouted “Crucify” just a few short days later.

I think we all hope that if we had been there that fateful day, we would not have been among those who shouted “Hosanna” one moment and “Crucify” the next. But, too often, we are exactly those people.

I have a friend who use pastor a good-sized church in the mid-west. He had been there for 10 years and under his leadership, the church had grown, they had become financially secure, built a new sanctuary, their youth programs had exploded and they did a whole lot of good in their community. My friend was well liked by his congregation and everything seemed to be going just fine. That is until one Sunday, when my friend came out as gay, during his sermon. In a matter of days, the congregation turned against him, the elders voted to remove him, and my friend lost his home, his job and his faith community. My friend ultimately gave up his ministerial credentials and has not stepped into a pulpit since that day. And to be clear, it wasn’t just my friend who was impacted by the cries of Crucify, as the larger church lost an effective preacher and a compassionate pastor, as a result. What happened to my friend is, sadly, more common than not.

What happens when our Hosannas turn sour? What happens when we allow our faith to become so nearsighted that we are unable to recognize the central message of Jesus’ ministry? Are we so caught up in our petty differences, are we so absorbed in church politics, are we so willing to maintain an “us versus them” attitude, to the point that our only possible cry can be Crucify?

Who are your cries of Crucify, directed towards? Is it the Muslim at prayer in his mosque? Is it the woman who presides at communion or who has the audacity to preach God’s word? Is it the gay pastor who only wants to follow God’s call and serve the church? I’ll ask again, who are your cries of Crucify, directed towards?

As we enter Holy Week, I invite you into a time of reflection. I invite you to remember that the sacrifice of God’s son wasn’t just for a few. I invite you to open your hearts and minds to the central message of Jesus’ ministry, and I invite you to allow the Holy Spirit to turn your cries of Crucify into shouts of Hosanna.

AMEN