

“Another Awkward Story Filled with Hope”

Matthew 21:1-11

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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We have read a series of stories that present awkward situations for us this Lent. Two weeks ago, we read the story about Jesus’ healing the man born blind—healing him by spitting on the ground, making mud with the saliva, and then spreading it on the man’s eyes. Needless to say, we did not dwell on that part of the story in this time when we have been warned not to touch our own faces, much less anyone else’s! Last week we read a story about illness and death. Jesus does bring Lazarus back to life, but illness and grief still pervade the story, and the anthem that had been planned for that day before the onset of COVID-19 was, “Breathe on Me, Breath of God.”

Today we’ve just read a story about a crowd, the Palm Sunday crowd because it is Palm Sunday, but a crowd, nonetheless, something we are supposed to avoid. Surely it is “O.K.” to talk about a crowd, but it does seem like rubbing salt in a wound. It’s like a preacher talking about food near the end of a sermon when it is almost mealtime, but you can’t eat anything yet because you are at church, though today perhaps you can, assuming your Mom or Dad hasn’t forbidden this.

All of these stories are awkward in this day of physical distancing, and to add insult to injury, today’s story, the story about a crowd, is especially awkward because we have so many misconceptions about this particular crowd. We’ve all heard the derisive claims. I must confess to having included some of them in my teaching and preaching many years ago. *The same crowd that shouts “Hosanna!” shouts, “Crucify!” How can they be so fickle? Jesus comes to be their Savior, but they don’t even know who he is. They think he is some kind of king or political liberator. How can they be so blind?* We’ve all heard the claims.

So, what’s wrong with them? First, the crowd that welcomes Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is not the same crowd that demands later this week that Pilate crucify him. There may be people who are present

both days—we don't really know—but they are two different gatherings on two different days. Second, we don't know who the people think Jesus is. They may understand more than we realize.

Matthew's telling of this story found in all four canonical Gospels presents Jesus as a king like Solomon who, according to 1 Kings 1:32–40, rides into town on a donkey when he is anointed. The verb used here is the same verb used for Solomon and it is not used anywhere else in scripture. So, perhaps the people think of Jesus as some kind of king.

But later Jewish literature suggests that the appearance of a donkey at a festival has a clear messianic quality. The people do shout, "Hosanna!" which means. "Save us!"

And at the end of the story, when someone, perhaps an authority figure, asks, "Who is this?" (meaning—who does he think he is?!) the crowd replies, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

So, Jesus is a king, a messiah and a prophet in this telling of the story. But merging all versions of the story together, and bathing them in images we have been given over the years, we tend to assume that the people expect a political conqueror while Jesus comes to bring spiritual salvation. It is much more complicated than this.

Yet, no matter what the people's expectations are, if they include a desire to be delivered from Roman oppression, is this really such a bad thing? Is Jesus not concerned about their oppression?

We have a deep desire to be delivered from our current set of realities that feel oppressive—fear of a highly contagious virus, physical isolation, economic stress. Does the God we know in Christ not care about these realities, including the lives that are lost? Is there anything wrong or inappropriate in longing for release even while we do what we can to reduce the spread of the virus, care for each other in the ways we can and proclaim our hope in something more than this life?

The physical threat of this virus is enough to oppress us. While it may not have the highest mortality rate, it is highly contagious, and this means that many lives will be lost, perhaps not as many as in the flu of 1918, but still many. One percent of a huge number is still a lot. Yet in addition to the physical threat, the fact that no one knows when the virus will be brought under control and thus how long our lives will be

unsettled heightens our anxiety. We are stuck waiting on the unknown, as Trey noted last week, and this is oppressive!

So, we can understand, at least in some small way, how the people in Jerusalem feel. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” In other words, “Thank God you are here, Jesus; save us from our oppression!” It is a genuine expression of hope for deliverance from oppression which may explain, at least in part, why Jesus embraces the celebration rather than shushing the people and telling them they don’t understand what kind of Savior he is.

Yet there may be another reason why Jesus embraces this celebration. It’s not just that the people’s most pressing concern is valid. Part of his mission actually is to address this kind of oppression. The traditional Sunday School perspective, and the most common pulpit perspective, is that the people want political deliverance while Jesus comes to bring spiritual deliverance. And this is part of the truth, just not the whole truth, on both sides of the comparison.

The fact that the people want to be delivered from Roman rule, very much like our forbearers wanted to be free from British control, does not mean that they don’t want spiritual wellbeing. And the fact that Jesus comes to bring spiritual salvation does not mean that he doesn’t care about the people’s wellbeing in other ways. What sort of Messiah would say to people living in oppression—whether in ancient Israel or modern-day Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Russia or Congo—“I’m here to help you in the next life, there’s just not much I can do about this one.”?

Jesus dies on a cross and is raised to new life to offer forgiveness for our sins and hope for eternal life. We do not question these realities, especially this week as we walk with Jesus through times of suffering and death. The hymnwriter is right when he says, “When I was sinking down... Christ laid aside his crown for my soul (“What Wondrous Love Is This?”).” But the cross is about more than personal failings. Jesus dies to offer redemption for personal, social and systemic ills.

His calling, as recorded in Luke 4, reflects this broader focus, as the Spirit is said to anoint him to preach good news *and* proclaim release

to the captives, to let the oppressed go free *and* proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (vv. 18–19). His ministry includes teaching *and* healing, the care of bodies *and* souls. His death offers companionship in suffering of all kinds and salvation for all brokenness. His resurrection offers hope for eternal life which includes life beyond death and a different quality of life now—life transformed by the hope of eternity. In other words, it's not just “pie in the sky.” Jesus cares about the next life and this life too. Jesus cares about every aspect of our wellbeing—physical, emotional and spiritual—and he addresses our concerns at every possible level of existence—personal, social and systemic.

So, while Jesus offers something different and more than the people expect, he also addresses what they see as their most pressing need. He offers deliverance from oppression—just not in the traditional way. Rather than overthrowing the Roman government militarily, he transforms the world through a different vision of community. Rather than forcing change that might be forced back, he provides a more enduring solution to the problem of injustice, if people are willing to embrace it—a whole new way of life made possible by grace. Rather than overcoming violence with violence, he lays down his life in love.

An early Christian hymn quoted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Philippi puts it this way. It says that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” And it is because of this that every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God (Philippians 2:6–11).

But Paul doesn't just quote this hymn and affirm what it says about Jesus; he encourages early believers to have this same mind in them that was in Christ - to humble themselves and lay down their lives for others. This is how the world is delivered from oppression—not by a reversible military action or a single medical solution (though we pray for one now!), but by people choosing to live in a different way—selflessly, for others, seeking peace and justice, health and salvation for all.

We might question whether this approach works. Are we talking about trickle-down or trickle-up transformation? Are we assuming that

if individuals change, society will? Individuals don't change that much, and even when they do, they don't very often take the transformation of the world seriously. Well, it's not just about trickle-up transformation, but individuals do change, and sometimes they make a difference—some like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in big, observable ways; others in small, quiet ways that still provide cause for hope.

I think about all the things people are doing right now to help others. In a time of tremendous turmoil which could bring out the worst in us, the best is coming out in many different people and places. Distilleries are making hand sanitizer, restaurant workers are feeding medical professionals, using funds from the larger community. Manufacturers are converting their processes to make medical supplies. Sometimes it's individuals, sometimes it's corporations or organizations, but it always depends upon people choosing to be helpful.

I think about our church family as well, all the ways our people are emptying themselves in service—medical professionals and others in community service risking their lives to help others; people doing practical things to make a difference like making phone calls, preparing meals and running errands for simple things like toilet paper... all of us dramatically altering our lives, remaining physically isolated, to reduce the spread of COVID-19; our children singing the introit together even though they are apart... We are supporting businesses harmed by current realities and looking into ways of caring for people who have lost jobs or pay. We are finding creative ways to continue ministries.

It may not seem like much, and we are ready for this strange time to end, but until it does, we live faithfully each day and our actions are shaped by the one who enters Jerusalem to a hero's welcome, knowing he will be dead within a week. He does it anyway because he knows this is only the way to deliverance—personal deliverance from sin, social deliverance from injustice, systemic deliverance from evil—the only way is to lay down life for others.

In the end, neither the Palm Sunday story nor the larger story of this week may provide a cure for COVID-19, but these stories and the truths they impart provide empowerment for us to live as people of faith,

hope and love in a time like this. We believe in a God who hears all of our cries for deliverance with compassion and we follow a Savior who provides a way for that deliverance. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!