

Incidents of Praise

Palm Sunday Weekend – March 31/April 1, 2007
Sermon Background Study

John 12:12-26 (NRSV)

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Do we shout “Hosanna!,” as we gratefully welcome our Lord and Savior – not just today, but each week?

Crowds had been gathering since sunrise. The story about the raising of Lazarus in nearby Bethany raced through the city. Could it be? What did it mean? Who is this man named Jesus? How could he have such power? The Jewish leaders, committed to getting rid of Jesus one way or another had already laid plans to eliminate Lazarus as well, finding themselves in a frustrating game of whack-a-mole. The ever-hot embers of revolution threatened to explode yet again at the Passover festival.¹

Who is Jesus?

As we’ve seen, this is the overarching question in John’s gospel and it requires a response from every person that encounters Jesus in the gospel, from Nicodemus the Pharisee, to the Samaritan woman at the well, to the cripple at the Pool of Bethesda. Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is a clear claim to be Messiah, but that alone doesn’t fully answer the question that John poses.

Despite all the messianic symbolism in the Palm Sunday story, John helps us to see that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John’s quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God’s people – very messianic in other words. But John changes the opening words of the quotation from “*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*” to “*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion,*” from Zephaniah 3:14-16:

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst . . .

Do not fear, O Zion . . .

It is not merely the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself! On that Sunday morning, the crowds escort the Word into Jerusalem.¹

Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God’s departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn’t really any sign that God had returned. The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God’s promise: “See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1). What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on Monday, Jesus didn’t head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple (see the synoptic gospels).

1. It is crucial to see that to a first century Jew, Messiah and God were certainly not synonyms. Calling Jesus “Messiah” said nothing about his divinity.

¹Ancient Jerusalem was a sprawling city with a population of 60,000 or so. But at festival time, the city’s population would swell to nearly 200,000! And no festival was bigger or more well-attended than Passover. In Jesus’ day, Passover presented a real problem for the Roman

The Raising of Lazarus

Chapters 11 and 12 in John's gospel prepare for us for what is to come. Lazarus dies and is then returned to life (11:1). Caiaphas, the high priest that year, urges that the life of Jesus be given up to save the Jewish nation from Roman wrath, though Caiaphas doesn't grasp the intense irony in his words (11:45-57). Mary anoints Jesus as if for a burial (12:1-8). After Jesus' messianic entry into Jerusalem, even non-Jews come looking for him – and Jesus knows then that the hour has arrived.

With Easter only a week away, the story of Lazarus needs a closer look. How does it prepare us for Jesus' own death and resurrection? Was Lazarus raised from the dead in the same way as Jesus? The answer is a straightforward "no." Lazarus was brought back to his old life while Jesus was resurrected to new life. Lazarus was resuscitated, went home to continue aging and would eventually die again. Jesus, in contrast, was resurrected to eternal life – no more aging, no more death.

Here's an analogy that might help. Lazarus' raising was akin to someone who dies on the operating table but then is brought back to life. That person hasn't defeated death, just merely been prevented from completing the process. Jesus, on the other hand, dies on the cross, goes from death to a life-after-death and, finally, to the "life after life-after-death" of Easter resurrection. Jesus' resurrection represented a victory over death that Lazarus' raising did not.

You see, the people of the ancient world knew that the dead stayed dead. For them, if there was any sort of after-life, it was a shadowy existence and generally unpleasant. The answer to Job's question, "If mortals die, will they live again?" (14:14) was an emphatic "No!" Yet, among the ancients, the Jews told a different story. By Jesus' day, most Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead, in death's undoing. If sin had brought banishment from the garden and foreclosed the possibility of living forever, the Jews' expectation was that God would one day bring them back from exile so that they might live forever in a right and good relationship with God and one another.

After Jesus' resurrection, his followers proclaimed to everyone who would listen that the resurrection of the dead had begun. To the Jews, this claim was puzzling at best because their expectation was that everyone would be raised at the same time. To the non-Jews, the Christians were claiming something that everyone knew simply didn't happen! But for the Christians, Jesus' resurrection meant that death had been undone. Death's defeat meant the exile from the garden had ended which meant sin had been defeated as well, for it was sin that had led to the exile in the first place. Death was now no more than one more stage on our way to an embodied eternity with God and one another.

When Jesus arrives to enter within the city walls, he wraps around himself all the messianic, the kingly, symbols he can find. In keeping with Zechariah 9, Jesus rides through the crowds on a donkey, a triumphant yet humble king. The crowds wave palm branches while they chant "Hosanna!" and recite verses from Psalm 118. The crowds meet Jesus outside the city walls and escort him in, as was the ancient custom for arriving kings and conquerors.

In response to those who ask, "Who is Jesus?," he gave them an unmistakable answer. He is their king, their Messiah. God's anointed one, sent from the Father to usher in God's kingdom and restore not only the Jews but all humanity to a right relationship with God.

Indeed, with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, any confusion or uncertainty about Jesus' claims are cleared away. Thus, that day, some Greeks (Gentiles) come looking for him. Jesus' hour has come (12:27). The whole world has heard. It is time.

A covenant to worship regularly.

It's easy to get caught up in the joy and excitement of Palm Sunday. The lines of children circling the sanctuary waving their palms. All the beautiful and stirring music. It doesn't take a big act of imagination to place ourselves in the crowd on that Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago. And it isn't hard to sustain the excitement through Easter.

Yet, sadly, it can be hard for us to extend the Palm Sunday praise of our Lord and Savior to all the Sundays that follow Easter. We don't always relish the opportunity to come to St. Andrew each week to praise God and to tell others about God's work in our lives.

This is made all the more difficult when we treat worship attendance as a hit or miss thing, rather than the time each week when we, in fellowship with God and one another, celebrate the worth of God.

Thus, we, as a congregation, will invite one another to enter into a covenant to attend worship weekly throughout the remainder of 2007. We could just say to ourselves, "Let's just try harder to be here." But it is not about merely trying. God's people are a covenant people, bound together and to God in trust and faithfulness. This worship covenant makes concrete our commitment to grow and to serve as God's covenant people. We hope that you and your family will participate in this commitment.

occupiers. Not only was the city stuffed with throngs of Jews who resented the Roman occupiers as easily as they breathed, Passover itself was emotionally charged. After all, Passover celebrated the Exodus from Egypt, when God had saved the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors. It certainly didn't take much imagination to lump the hated Romans in with Pharaoh. The typical Jew on the streets of Jerusalem anxiously awaited the day when God would free them from the Romans just as he had freed them from Egypt. God had saved them then; God would save them now.

Reading With Heart & Mind

April 1 ~ 7

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday John 18:28-38a Jesus is taken before Pilate. Why do you think that Pilate is reluctant to execute Jesus? Do you think that Pilate is concerned about the possibility of taking an innocent life?</p>	<p>Monday John 18:38b - 19:16 Why are the Jewish leaders so anxious to crucify Jesus? Why do you think the crowds have turned on Jesus so quickly? Note the damning admission of the Jewish leaders in v. 15. They were to have no king but God!</p>
<p>Tuesday John 19:17-19:42 Who is with Jesus as he hangs on the cross? Where are Peter and the others? Why do the soldiers plan to break Jesus legs? Why do they not go through with it?</p>	<p>Wednesday John 20:1-18 What does Mary think has happened to Jesus' body? Why might someone take it? Why do you think Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener?</p>
<p>Thursday John 20:19-31 Jesus had promised his disciples that another one, the Holy Spirit, would come after him. Here, the Holy Spirit arrives. What have the disciples told Thomas about Jesus? Thomas' confession in v. 28 is the first time that someone calls Jesus "God" in the gospel.</p>	<p>Friday John 21:1-19 Why do you think the disciples returned to fishing? What could they be waiting for? Why does Jesus challenge Peter three times?</p>
<p>Saturday John 21:20-25 After having read through the entire gospel, who do you think is "the disciple whom Jesus loved?" What is the larger meaning of this final story?</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected.

If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are your expectations when you come to a worship service at St. Andrew? What do you hope to receive? What do you intend to give? What sort of worship service do you find most satisfying? Why? What do you think God wants from us in our worship?
2. A recent article in a Christian Magazine had a provocative title: "Worshiping the Lamb or Entertaining the Sheep?" Do you think we tend to come to church expecting to be entertained? What do you think is most important in a worship service? What would you like to see changed about our services at St. Andrew? What do you think God would like to see changed? What can we do to help ensure that our focus is on the true worship of God?
3. In the first centuries after Jesus, Christians stopped using the word *proskyneo* for worship because it was also used by pagans in reference to the worship of their gods. Instead, when referring to their own worshiping of the one true God, Christians used only the Greek word for serving, *latreou*. How might our attitudes about service change if we see our service as an act of worship? How might our service acts themselves be changed? Why are so many of us reluctant to serve? Might this reluctance be overcome if we saw service as an act of true worship?
4. What is the value of entering into a worship covenant to be here each week unless we are away? What has been your own worship attendance? Are you willing to enter into this worship covenant? If so, why? What might you hope to gain? If you are reluctant to make this commitment, why are you?