

"It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This...Until It Does"
Palm Sunday -- March 25, 2018

JOHN 12:12-19

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!"

Luke 19:39-40

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

He's only been in the world for a few hours. He's lying on his back. He's all by himself. He's not at all sure about what's going on. His world and everything in it is brand new. All he knows is – he isn't happy. Or content. Or whatever newborns are supposed to be. He intends to protest this terrible treatment and proceeds to do so in the only way he knows how. He begins, quietly at first and then with increasing enthusiasm, to cry. In just a few moments his cry is a howl. He even wonders himself how someone so new could make so much noise. In a very short time he finds himself scooped up and cradled in warm arms and fed and dry and of course in his baby mind he learns the lesson. Noise. Protest. Brings results. He banks this away for the next time he needs it. Which in a baby's world will be very soon.

She's two and in her stroller on a warm spring day. She's surrounded a couple of adults she knows, her mom and dad, and hundreds of others. From her perspective there's not much to look at. Lots of shoes. Lot's of legs. The truth is she doesn't like being in this place all that much. This stroller thing is o.k. as long as it's moving along. But sitting in one place, Not so much. Her little brain conjures up that list of tricks she's become quite adept at using when she needs to let someone know things aren't going according to her plan. She reaches up, imploring Momma to pick her

up. But at the moment Momma seems to be otherwise occupied. She'd try daddy but that rarely works. So plan 'B' is immediately put into place. She's pre-verbal so she can't just say, "Hey, I don't like this, let's go." So she reverts to younger days and begins to cry. Not a cry of discomfort, but a cry of, "I'm pretty angry at being ignored." Having gained their attention these two parents in their wisdom ask the preverbal child what she wants. A pacifier. Yeck. A cookie. Not gonna work this time. Something to drink in a sippy cup. Nah. What she wants is to leave this place where big people almost step on her and aside from a dog or two nothing is of interest at her level. So the angry cry morphs into a blood chilling howl of anguish. That ear splitting noise brings with it the unspoken pleas of those around this little family who are trying to listen to a speaker. "Get her out of here." Three or four minutes, proffered stuffed animals, and some embarrassed parents later she ratchets it up another notch, and bless them, they finally get it – and roll her away. She sits back, nibbles on her cookie and smiles. Protest is a wonderful thing. It gets results again.

From the time of our birth and in our early development we learn, by experience, that if something needs to change, you have to make some noise about it. Now the truth is that as we get older we are more and more controlled and programmed into understanding that these primal kind of

protests, from temper tantrums, to belligerence, to holding our breath, all to get what we want, are acceptable behavior. So for the most part we store away our ability to effect change through protest until such a time as we feel threatened or otherwise convinced that we something has to give, our situation has become unacceptable.

Say for instance you are a citizen of a small nation like Israel that has had an up and down history that for the most part has included the notion that you, like a child, are somehow favored by your God. You feel that you are chosen by God for a purpose and that God will come to your aid when times are most dire. God has done so in your past. Promised land, deliverance from Egypt, more promised land. More recently, because children don't always behave themselves, unacceptable behavior, there was that annoying few generations in captivity in Babylon. But you pitched a fit and cried out 'how long O Lord, must we suffer for the sins of those before us,' and God heard you and brought you back to this land. Your land. The land God gave you.

Only now there's another bully on the block who steals your lunch money and tells you what you can or can't do and charges you a tax just because he can. His name is Rome. He's not nice. Your prOtest over against the might of Rome sound pretty weak. Your government and your

puppet king Herod, is useless. Your religious leaders have chosen to show deference to these Romans in order to maintain some autonomy and only complain if they interfere with their own corruption. Their temple taxes and gouging of pilgrims who just was to show up, say some prayers and go home in peace.

You had hoped they'd get tired of you and leave. Palestine is not exactly the apple of anyone's eye. But they brought a Caesar wannabe' named Pilate, who one afternoon rides into town on a huge white stallion like some conquering hero.

After a long while in this Roman captivity, some stories begin to circulate that maybe, just maybe God hasn't forgotten us after all. There's a guy, a Nazarene preacher from Galilee of all things, who seems to have the right pedigree. Born, they say, in the city of David. Preaching about the kingdom of God and calling himself the 'son of man.' This could be the guy. Then a week or so before this year's Passover there's a rumor that he's out in Bethany and he, get this, he actually raised a guy, a guy named Lazarus from the dead. How dead? You doubters ask. Four days in the grave dead the answer comes back.

About a week later, on a Sunday of all days, he's been spotted leaving Bethany, which is only a couple of miles away. Somebody else says that he sent a couple of teenagers, kids named Andrew and Philip, to borrow a donkey, a donkey's colt for him to ride. Somebody says, "Oh my gosh, that's what the prophet said the Messiah would do. He's going to come in to the city riding a colt." Another guy says, quoting, "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" "Our king?!" Somebody else says, 'not like that pompous Pilate.' A king from God. And just like that the word begins to spread. That low guttural urging, that primal voice inside us begins to form the sounds of protest.

In about a new York minute, or Jerusalem minute, all of these Israelites who are locals or in the city for the festival of the Passover feel this thing happening inside them. Somehow after living in fear of these invaders all these years, after having the boot of Rome on their necks they feel the stirring of courage. Babies, in mother's arms start howling as they are bundled up and every one heads out onto the Bethany road. Grown men feel something primordial stirring in them. Something some of them have never felt before. They hack off palm branches to give him a carpet of vegetation to ride in on. They find themselves shouting something that

sounds sweet and nice to us, something children sing and shout once a year, but something that was for them much more. Coming from deep within them arises the roaring sound of protest of something they felt they could no longer tolerate. No more could they sit idly, even though joining such a protest could be dangerous, the Romans could send out a centurion and his hooligans to squelch them, but while there was the possibility, just the possibility that this person, what was his name again, "Jesus!" they had to take the chance. "Oh my goodness, Jesus, Yeshua, even his name means savior." So they shout with an ever increasing din as the parade entourage which left Bethany with maybe 50 and is now hundreds comes into view. They cry out over and over and over, deeply revolutionary words, words which would echo back to the city to the Romans and that Puppet king Herod, words of protest, words that promised upheaval and insurgency, words that in their greatest longing, their deepest hope would free them from the tyranny. Would take from them the pain and suffering they bore from the deaths of their young. Words which would inspire the man on the donkey's back to rise up with them, to rally the masses, to be their Messiah, their Lord, their king, their Christ. "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel." Hosanna. Which we know means, "Save Us, Save us, save us...."

What the people cry out isn't lost on the Pharisees. These words, these "Hosannas and blessed are he's" these words of declaration and proclamation, the hope bringing cries create a great stirring in the crowd, comes from deep within them, a voice they no longer knew they had, a very dangerous stirring. These are words of insurrection that might cause an uprising. So the frightened pharisees who are fearful that such a display will stir up the hornet's nest that is Rome, put their fingers to lips and say, "Shh, teacher, teacher... Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He, knowing that the day is his answers, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

As we stand at the Sunday of holy week we aren't we exactly like those people waving branches and spreading cloaks. Fearful people. People in need of reassurance. People who need to know that in spite of all the forces around us that would still destroy everything that is good and pure – that God is still in control. In spite of all the shouting, in spite of all the angry railing and ugly rhetoric and partisan politics that has completely forgotten something so basic as civility, in spite of desperate shouts for social justice and the need to be heard in a world gone deaf to so much need, that in spite of the powers that be - God is still God. So we listen.

Later in our human history the cries of protest have spawned

movements that brought about great change for the people. The Protestant reformation changed the church. The American revolution, a protest movement of epic proportions, created this great nation. Protest brought about the end of Apartheid, protest gave women the vote, protest brought about equal rights. Yesterday, across this nation and across the globe, across America and in Africa, in Haiti, in Europe and Australia and New Zealand, in Japan and in the British Isles, in 844 places on one day, people, young people, old people, middle aged people, little girls in strollers who didn't want to be there, people of all colors and languages and genders and orientations and faiths, and yes even politics, gathered – and led by our nation's children, teenagers whose cries reach a fevered, frantic pitch, a terrible beautiful noise born out of fear, out of wonder and how they, in their innocence, in their youth, in their schools and churches and on their streets and in their bedrooms and on their playgrounds could become targets of the sinful, sorrowful rage of another human being. Another human being holding a gun. A gun whose collective price of purchase multiplied by 300 million in this nation means so much money, so much money that powers that be, the Herods and the pilates and those who hold freedom in hand proudly declare it has a price. Sadly, a far too large portion of the cost is the lives of our youth.

Is it a coincidence that the rallies around the world called “March for Our Lives” happened on Palm Sunday weekend? Dare we think God to be so weak or without resource? The infant in arms, the toddler, the teenager – are crying out “Hosanna – Save us.” Enough is enough. Lord, deliver us. It is a cry and sigh that should strike fear in the modern day Pharisee who will say to them, ‘shh... be nice.’

This morning we shout out as an act of solidarity. Of joining in community. Of expressing our desire to let it be known that Jesus Christ is the ruler of this world. As the children of God and the saints of the church we come in faith and in our need, because we need to hear. We need to hear that life, though difficult, is in God’s hands. We need to hear that even though we live in a world of disorder and chaos that in this Holy week God brings all these things together. We need to know that life, though fragile, is in God’s care. We need to know by the sacrifice of Jesus for us that we are loved with an unbelievable love that will not be silent. For these days between Hosanna and Alleluia is where we live! We come to be gathered here and we listen and hear echoing through the ages the murmuring anticipation of the saints who are the church – who with us this day come with us bearing branches of palm, casting cloaks on the path way, with ancient stones shouting in protest against the sins of the world, Hosanna,

blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" We come knowing that until we do that shouting, it's not going to get any better than this. Until by the grace of God. It does. Hosanna! Blessed is he that comes!