

Palm Sunday - April 5, 2020

“Not a Tame Lion”

In the last month, our lives have shifted with jarring speed.
In one way or another, our normal patterns have been disrupted.

We now live now with restrictions, anxiety, uncertainty,
and the very real potential of heartbreak.
The world as we knew it, just a month ago, no longer exists.

As a message of hope and encouragement
I want to remind us that Jesus experienced
an even more swift reversal of circumstances.

We see this in three scenes in the last week of Jesus' life:
the one we celebrate today, on Palm Sunday,
when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd;
a second scene, just five days later,
when a bloodthirsty mob shouted for his crucifixion;
and a third scene, the evening before that,
when Jesus prayed alone, in the Garden of Gethsemane,
in preparation for what was to come.

1. Palm Sunday

The first scene—Jesus' entry into Jerusalem—
is often called a triumphal entry,
because people all along the way were hailing him as king.
They threw their coats on the road, as a sort of red carpet;
They waved palm branches,
like people waving placards at a political convention,
and shouted hosanna, which literally means, “Save now!”
“Hosanna” was originally a cry for deliverance
that had come to be a shout of praise and jubilation—
because help was on the way.

That day Jerusalem was teeming with people
who had come from many places and nations for the Passover.
As Jesus rode down the slope into the city, they cheered wildly in the hope
that Jesus would overthrow their Roman oppressors
by the supernatural powers that they had heard about,
that Jesus would conquer and rule as a Son of David, the warrior king,
so they shouted: Hosanna, save us now, Jesus, son of David!

But Jesus had carefully prepared for this moment.
He had instructed his disciples to bring him a young donkey,
and he rode into Jerusalem, not on a war horse like a conquering king;
but on a *donkey* in fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Zechariah,

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See,
your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding
on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Zechariah 9:9

By this visual message, in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy,
Jesus was communicating two things:
Yes, I am the Christ, the Messiah, God's only chosen King;
but I am not the kind of king you want or expect.
I have not come to destroy, but to forgive and heal.
I have not come to conquer by force, but by love.
I have not come to lead you into war, but into peace.

Try as they might, by their praise and adulation,
the crowd could not manipulate Jesus into doing what they wanted.

In his book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
C.S. Lewis includes a conversation between Mr. Beaver
and the four children who stumbled into Narnia.
Mr. Beaver is attempting to describe Aslan,
who represents Jesus in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.
Mr. Beaver begins, "Aslan is a lion, *the* Lion, the *great* Lion."
"Ooh," Susan says. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe?
I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."
"Safe?" says Mr Beaver, "Who said anything about safe?
Of course he isn't safe. He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.
But he's *good*. He's the King, I tell you. . ."

Jesus is who he is, a King like no other.
He is good, but he is not tame;
His plans and purposes are different from ours;
and sometimes they confound us.
Like the crowd shouting praise and waving palm branches that day,
we cannot always see; we cannot always understand;
and too often we persist in demanding what we want.

2. Good Friday

In the second scene, five days later, Jesus was on trial. The Roman governor, Pilate, knew that Jesus was innocent. Four times he tried to avoid imposing a death sentence: He told *the Jews to settle the matter themselves*. He transferred *the case to King Herod*. He attempted *a compromise of scourging and release*. In his most hopeful attempt, he appealed to the practice of releasing one prisoner at Passover time. He called out to the crowd:

Whom do you want me to release for you:
Barabbas or Jesus, who is called Christ? (Matthew 27:17, ESV)

The mob screamed back: Barrabas!
Pilate answered: "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?
They all shouted, "Let him be crucified!
Pilate objected: "Why? What evil has he done?"
But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" (Matthew 27:21-23).

Since the *whole* city was stirred just five days before, there must surely have been some overlap in the two crowds. Some who were waving palm branches *then* were *now* shouting "Let him be crucified!"

In fact, the desire of the crowd was the same: they wanted a freedom fighter. If Jesus would not deliver them by supernatural power, they wanted Barabbas to rescue them by violent revolution.

In the swift span of five days, Jesus went from tumultuous adulation to bitter condemnation.

The disciple, John, who witnessed, first-hand, the crowds in both scenes, later wrote in the book of Revelation 5:5-6

Then one of the elders said to me 'Do not weep! See the *Lion* of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.' Then I saw a *Lamb*, looking as if it has been slain, standing in the center of the throne."

John is told to look for a triumphant *Lion*,
but there in the midst of the throne is a *Lamb*.
Jesus is depicted as both Lion and Lamb,
a meld of such diverse traits that,
to our finite minds, is utterly incompatible. (Keller, *King*, 169)

The crowds on Palm Sunday could not wrap their heads
around these incompatible realities.
On Palm Sunday, they wanted a king;
on Good Friday, they demanded a lamb.

We might think:
How could they be so fickle? So wishy-washy? So inconsistent?

This is not a first century response.
Certainly not a Jewish response.
This is *our* response now, mine and yours, all too often. . .

We want Jesus to do what we want:
to fulfill *our* desires, *our* hopes, *our* dreams.
We want Jesus to march by our drumbeat, in step with our plans.

We, too, are ambivalent.
One day we want a King with supernatural power to answer our prayers;
and we resist the Lamb who calls us to admit our sin and repent.
The next day we want a Lamb to forgive our sins, take away our guilt,
but we don't want a King, who calls us to obedience and sacrificial service.
Every once and awhile, we know we need both, a Lamb and a King.

3. Gethsemane

This brings us to a third scene—in the Garden of Gethsemane.
This time there are no crowds.
Jesus is all alone.
Even his closest disciples, though they are nearby, are sleeping.

In this scene of inconceivable agony,
Jesus' initial prayer is to be spared from what he knows is ahead.
Like any of us would, he wants to escape horrific suffering and death.

As the scene unfolds, there seems to be a progression in Jesus' prayer.
Three times, he prays with heart-wrenching honesty.

The first time, he prays:

Abba—Daddy, Papa—the most intimate name for his heavenly father.
All things are possible for you.
Spare me from this horrible suffering and death (Mark 14:36).
Yet not what I want, but what you want. (Mark 14:36)

The second time, Jesus seems to relinquish this hope of release:
His prayer begins: If there is no other way. . .

Every time he prays, all three times, his prayer ends:
I want what you want. Your will be done.

In the end, after this intense battle
between his natural desires and his unwavering trust in his Heavenly Father,
Jesus comes to full and unqualified surrender:
yet not as I will, but as you will. Your will be done.

And that is how Jesus taught us to pray:
your kingdom come, *your* will be done on earth, as it is in heaven . . .

There are times when we experience our own personal Gethsemane.
When life is going reasonably well,
when one season of our life
is progressing more-or-less smoothly to the next,
and all of a sudden, something shifts—
a broken marriage, a lost job, a tragic accident, an acute illness—
a worldwide pandemic;
and we turn to God in distress;
we cry out, like Jesus: let this cup of suffering pass from me.

When we pray in such times, for ourselves and for others,
we can be completely honest with God.
We can call out for what we think is *right* and *good* and *best*.
because Jesus *does* meet our earthly needs;
he *does* forgive our sins;
he *does* rescue us from temptation;
he *does* deliver us from evil.

At the same time, whether our prayers seem to be answered or not,
we can put our trust in God—
because we know that no earthly power can touch us apart from his will.
Nothing, absolutely nothing, can come into our lives
without his permission, limitation, and purpose.

We may shout to God in pain, frustration, desperation, and even anger;
we may wrestle with God in agony and unfiltered honesty;
and in the end, we want to get to the place of trusting him, no matter what.

Psalm 42—the passage that Mike read—
describes times when we are cast down, when we are in turmoil:

Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you in turmoil within me?

And the answer is this:

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Jesus is God's only chosen Lion, Lamb, and King.
He is not tame; he does not always do what we want or expect,
but he is always good—
and we can trust him, now and always.