



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Hosanna!

**Zechariah 9:9-12, Philippians
2:5-11, & St. Matthew 21:1-17**

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April 5, 2020 – Palm Sunday

In the Collect this morning we recalled that it was because of his tender love for mankind that the almighty and ever-living God of Creation sent his Son, Jesus, to humbly take our nature upon himself and to suffer death on a cross. And with that in mind, we also asked of God that in his mercy, we might walk in the way of Jesus' suffering so that we might also share in his resurrection.

We don't pray for suffering very often, do we? I'm not sure if the author of the Collect was actually asking for suffering—it's entirely possible, considering the purifying nature of suffering that we modern people have all but forgotten—or if he was simply acknowledging that to live is to suffer. Today's Collect goes all the way back to the time of Gregory the Great, to the 6th Century, and to a day when human beings had no illusions about being in control of things. Poverty and disease and war were realities of daily life and the most that most people could do was to ride out the storm and trust in the good promises of God. He would one day set all to rights and he'd begun the working of doing so that first Easter Day when Jesus rose from the grave. We may suffer, but we live in hope that as Jesus has been raised from the dead, so too, we will be when Jesus has put every enemy under his feet. Do you know what Gregory the Great did in those days of suffering? He sent out missionaries to proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord to the barbarian tribes of Germany and Britain.

It's helpful to be reminded of times like Gregory's and the way that Christians responded to them. I was reminded, too, this week of the story of Martin Rinckart. He was a German pastor during the Thirty Years war. His village was sacked three times. But, even worse, his part of the country was ravaged by a horrible plague. Every other pastor in the area died and he was left doing sometimes as many as fifty funerals a day. This man who lived through more sorrow and grief than we can imagine wrote the hymn "Now thank we all our God".

*Now thank we all our God, with heart,
and hands, and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in
whom the world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms hath
blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is
ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God thro' all
our life be near us!
With ever joyful hearts and blessed
peace to cheer us;
And keep us in his grace, and guide us
when perplexed,
And free us from all ills in this world
and the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God the
Father now be given,
The Son, and him who reigns with
them in highest heaven,
Eternal, Triune God, whom earth and
heav'n adore;
For thus it was, is now, and shall be,
evermore.*

The faith that could inspire those words when faced with days so dark that what we're dealing with seems like almost nothing ought to give us reason to hope. Brothers and Sisters, we serve the same God that Martin Rinckart served. We confess the same faith and the same Saviour that Martin Rinckart confessed. We look for the same hope that Martin Rinckart looked for. And that faith is one that doesn't ignore the suffering we face, but it is a faith that presses on,

nevertheless, not looking for escape, but looking to do the kingdom work that Jesus has called us to, looking to do the kingdom work that the Spirit enables us to do. It's a faith that is sure and certain of the sovereignty of God and of the lordship of Jesus. It's a faith that goes beyond mere acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. It's easy to say it. It's definitely not so easy to do it. But this is a faith that rests, again, sure and certain of it.

That's a message we need to hear right now and, providentially, that's one of the key themes of our Scripture lessons on Palm Sunday.

Our Old Testament lessons is taken from the prophecy of Zechariah, roughly five hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Whereas our Old Testament lessons the last couple of weeks have come from the time of Israel's exile, this one comes from the time of Israel's return from Babylon, but the theme is similar. The people had returned to the ruins of Jerusalem. They had an enormous rebuilding project ahead of them that was made worse by hostile neighbours. They were bad times. But through the prophet the Lord exhorted his people

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of
Jerusalem! (Zechariah 9:9a)**

Zion had little to rejoice about, but the Lord calls his people to rejoice anyway. Why?

**Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having
salvation is he... (Zechariah 9:9b)**

Rejoice, because your king is coming and he will bring righteousness and salvation. This king, says the Lord, will bring peace to the nations and his rule shall be from seas to sea and to the ends of the earth. In verse 11 the Lord says that he will do this because of the blood of his covenant. The Lord reminds the people of his

faithfulness. What he has promised he will surely do.

And yet this wasn't a promise that any of the people of Zechariah's day would see fulfilled. They would rebuild Jerusalem. They would rebuild the temple. But they would do it through great hardship. And even when the temple was rebuilt, it wouldn't be the same. The ark, the Lord's throne was long gone. The shekinah, the cloud of glory that represented the Lord's presence with his people would remain absent from the new temple. But the Lord called his people to rejoice anyway. They were to live in hope knowing that the Lord will do what he says even if it's not today or tomorrow or even in our lifetime. It wasn't a call to blind faith. It was a call to look back to the history of their people and to know the Lord's past goodness and faithfulness. Every generation has its part to play in the Lord's story of redemption and the part assigned to Zechariah's generation was to rejoice in hope of the Lord's coming even while facing very difficult days. In doing so they brought glory to the Lord's name in the sight of the watching nations. It's should be a reminder to us that for God's people there's more to life than just today or tomorrow or even next year. We're part of a story bigger than ourselves. Our ministry is built on the ministry of the generations of believers who have come before and what we build today will serve as a foundation for the believers who will come after us.

And, of course, the Lord proved his faithfulness as we see in our Gospel. Matthew makes a point of just that. Look at Matthew 21:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her.

Untie them and bring them to me.
(Matthew 21:1-2)

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem one last time. The Lord is coming to his people, just as he had promised in the days of the prophets. And Matthew goes out of his way to highlight this. Jesus doesn't just send his disciples to go into the village to round up a donkey. Jesus sends them into the village to round up a donkey, but does so using the word of Zechariah. Matthew says in verses 4-5:

This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

We should feel an almost overwhelming sense of the sovereignty of God here. Not only is Jesus coming to his people to fulfil what the Lord had promised, but he's doing it just as the Lord had promised through Zechariah. But it goes a step further. The Palm Sunday story is familiar. We all know what's about to happen. It's not just that in Jesus the Lord is finally coming to his people. Jesus is also going to his death as he rides into the city. All hell will break loose in just a few days. Jesus will be crucified. The disciples will run off in fear to hide. It's as if the Lord knew that all this would happen and so, out the outset of that first Holy Week, on Palm Sunday, he uses these events to remind the disciples that he is in control. The God who has brought Jesus to Jerusalem to fulfil his promises will remain in full control as the events of his arrest and crucifixion unfold.

Of course, the disciples didn't grasp this at all. We all know that living in faith in the midst of disaster isn't easy. It's all too easy to lose our focus, to be swept up in the crises and difficulties of the day, and to forget God's

promises and God's sovereignty. This is why we need to be steeped in the story of the Lord and his people. This is why we need to centre ourselves on Jesus and on his death and resurrection. Because there we see supremely the goodness and faithfulness of God. There was no darker day than that first Good Friday. It looked like a disaster to Jesus' friends. But the reality was that even on that worst of all days in the most horrific of all events, God was in control and working through to bring the most glorious day ever.

The rest of the story reminds us of God's sovereignty as well. Matthew goes on:

Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matthew 21:8-11)

"Hosanna!" It was a cry to God for help that, over time, became a cry of praise to the Lord. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the priests would process around the altar waving branches and shouting "Hosanna!"—a cry to the Lord for help, but also a cry of praise and faith knowing that the Lord hears the cries of his people. But on this day, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the people waved their branches at him and cried "Hosanna!" The Lord had finally come. The Messiah was here.

Palm Sunday stands in stark contrast to Good Friday. Today we hear the praises of the people as Jesus arrives, but in just a few days the praises turn to jeers and to cries of "Crucify him!". But, again, the story reminds us that

God was never out of control. Jesus knew he was going to his death and he knew that death was part of the plan. To save his people he had to die the death that they deserved. Even as sin and death rose up to their full height and did their worst, God remained sovereign and turned the death of Jesus back on his enemies on Easter morning.

St. Paul looked back on those events as he wrote to the Philippians:

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:9-11)

The devil for one brief moment thought that he was bringing Jesus down, but then we discover when it's over, that God was using the cross to exalt his Son, to defeat his enemies, and to bring salvation from sin and death. The crowds were angry with Jesus for getting their hopes up. They had thought he was the Messiah, but when he stood before them in chains, they lost faith and they lost hope. The Messiah was supposed to conquer Herod and the Romans, not let himself be arrested and beaten by them. But the resurrection changed everything and one day, after the gospel message has gone out to all the world, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

Brothers and Sisters, this is a timely message. Most of us have lived our lives up to this point feeling like we have some semblance of control—or at least that the powers that be in this world have control of things. As I said a couple of weeks ago, we've put our faith in the ability of science and medicine and economics and government to tame this world in which we live. And all it has taken to bring modernity to its knees is people

eating bats getting infected with a mutated virus that has quickly spread around the world. And now we see the limits of science and government and economics. They can all be good things. Science can tell us how to slow the spread of this disease and it can bring us a vaccine, but not right away. Government can issue directives to slow the spread, but those same directives are wreaking economic havoc. Like the devil, exposed as a fraud on Easter morning when his plans fall apart, the gods of modernity are being exposed before our eyes today. Just like ancient peoples who worshiped the Sun, rather than receiving God's good gifts and giving him glory and honour for them, we've turned his gifts into gods, we've placed our faith in them, they've become our sources of security, and we've all but forgotten the God who gave them to us.

This is the time when we Christians need to recover a profound sense of God's goodness, of his faithfulness, of his sovereignty. This pandemic caught the world by surprise, but it was no surprise to the Lord. This is the time when we need to look to Jesus and his cross and have our faith in the Lord strengthened and renewed so that we can carry on the mission of the Church. Brothers and Sisters, the false gods of the world are being exposed. A world that has swept our mortality under the rug is being confronted with it head-on. This is the time when we need to be faithful to our calling to proclaim the good news that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the world's true Lord. And to do that we need to be sure and certain of our hope. This Holy Week our ability to meet together as the Church to recall and to rehearse the events of that led Jesus to the cross is hindered by the crisis around us, but that doesn't mean we can't steep ourselves in God's word. We are walking through a time of social and sacramental fasting. Use this time to feast on the word. Read the story of God and his people and be reminded that he is sovereign and that

he is faithful, even on the darkest day. Read the story and be reminded that Jesus is Lord and be renewed in faith and hope. Live that faith in God's sovereignty and in Jesus' lordship as the world watches, as faith in our false gods is shaken, and be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in you.

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for mankind you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*