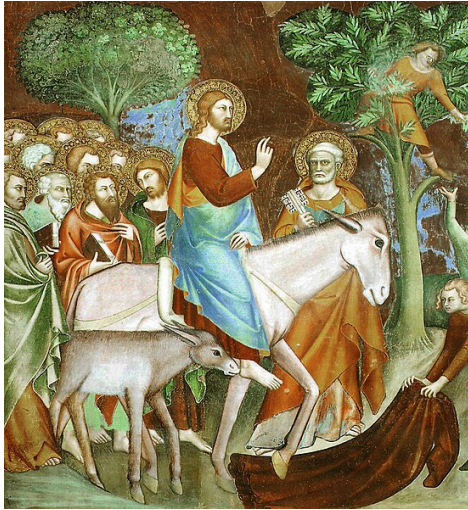


*Lyrics for His Life, Pt. 6*  
***Counting on the Corner***  
Psalm 118: 19-29

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Palm Sunday, Mar 24, AD 2024  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

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I love this 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian painting of Palm Sunday. There's a joyful energy from the child in the tree handing down palm branches to his friend. There's sweetness on the donkeys' faces and reverence in the laying down of a cloak along the path. Jesus raises his hand in blessing. The true King enters his holy city. He has come to take his throne.

Lines from Psalm 118 fit so perfectly here. We can hear Jesus say, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD." He's going to praise his Father in his holy temple.

We can hear the people crying out lines from Psalm 118. The gospels give us the Hebrew word they shouted, "Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!" The word Hosanna means, "Save us!" It was both a request and a praise. When they shouted Hosanna, they meant, "You are the Savior. So save us!" Then, they added these joyful lines from the psalm as Jesus went by, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD."

The gospels tell us that the people also called out, "Hosanna to the Son of David." They knew that the Messiah would be a descendant of the great King David. In their praises, they acclaimed Jesus as this new King David and they wanted him to save them the way a strong king delivers his nation from chaos and enemies and so brings peace. This was a rare moment, when the people actually got it that the man Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior and Lord of all. So for many centuries, Christ's people have been reenacting this moment. We've held processions on Palm Sunday to commemorate this event. Today, we join in the praises as we prepare to re-enter the whole story of Holy Week. It's wonderful to be part of this.

Of course we know how the story goes. We know that the shouts of “Hosanna!” would turn in five days to the shouts of “Crucify!” We know that Jesus would indeed take his throne on Good Friday. But his throne would be made of the rough wood of the cross. Jesus would save not by delivering the people from Roman occupation, but from the occupying power of sin inside every heart. Jesus would conquer, not politically but by conquering death in his glorious resurrection. This was the foundation of the new temple, the new covenant, the new way of God reconciling sinful, broken humanity to himself.

The religious leaders were jealous of Jesus’ popularity. They were also afraid that the crowds would get so worked up that they would start an insurrection. Rome would be forced to clamp down violently. So they challenged Jesus.



Jesus answered the religious leaders with a series of parables that came to a convicting conclusion. Jesus quoted words from Psalm 118! “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Jesus knew they would reject him. The religious and political leaders were the “builders” of the nation. They

did not want to yield their place to this strange Jesus. They did not want a Messiah who was not going to restore the nation politically. Jesus knew that. And he knew that he was building something new. He himself would be the cornerstone of a new creation. The new way of God and humanity connecting through himself. But these religious leaders, if they held onto the old, would miss out. So he added chillingly “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (Lk. 20: 18).

Mercy, Jesus, this is a good way to get yourself killed! Make the choices really stark. It’s as if Jesus said, “My Father is making me the cornerstone of a new, spiritual temple. The old one will be irrelevant. Believe in me and become part of it. Reject me and you will crack up against my Father’s cornerstone. You will wreck your life against the rock. What I’m getting started will one day overwhelm what you’re clinging to now. Your choice.”

That remains true all these centuries later. Jesus sets down as a great rock in the center of human culture and history. The most influential person who ever

lived. He can be to us the cornerstone of a new and glorious life. He can be the stumbling stone over which we wreck our lives.

This was true in his ministry. Never was there someone so merciful, so forgiving, so welcoming. “You are the light of the world,” he said to a group of impoverished, unlikely rag tag followers. “Your sins are forgiven,” he said to the sinful woman who wet his feet with her tears. “Today salvation has come to this house,” he said to the despicable tax collector. Anyone who cried out “Hosanna! Lord save!” Jesus embraced, healed, forgave and restored.

At the very same time, never was there someone so demanding. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” If you seek to save your life, you will lose it. But if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it. “I tell you, unless you repent, you will perish...Apart from me, you can do nothing.” This is so much to ask! He wants it all.

So the very good news of God’s arrival in Jesus can seem daunting to us. For this Jesus asks me to yield control of my life to him. What if he turns out to be another abuser? What if Jesus is another dominator? A controller? A constrictor? What if following him puts me under the power of crazy people?

We can very easily be torn over Jesus. I want mercy. I want the fulfillment he promises. The freedom and the life change. But. I fear dying to my old life. I resist bowing the knee. I don’t want there to be anyone higher than myself.

There’s a particular form this resistance takes among many of us today. The apostle Paul put his finger on this when he considered why so many of his own people, the good people, did not accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. He described them this way: “being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” Seeking to establish their own righteousness. What does he mean by that? I want to make my own rightness. I want to stand on my own two feet. I want my resume to justify my existence and get me rewards. I want to determine what is virtuous and makes for a good life, then pursue it. I want to establish my own rightness before God and others. Oh, that’s so tempting to us. I can create my own meaning. I can make myself feel all right, all fine.

That sounds brave. But, Paul says, that’s ignorant. Only God can make us right. Right in ourselves. Right before him. Right in the world. God has a rightness he wants to give us. He gives us the very life of Christ within us to shape us and

change us and make us more and more whole in our relationships. He longs to give us such grace. He wants to flow a river of mercy through us. But not on our own terms. Not as an accent to the lives we choose. No, Paul uses a repellent word: *submit*. I have to submit my quest to be all right and fine in myself. I have to ask for the rightness of Christ. I have to say, “I did not create my life. It does not belong to me. I cannot solve my life my way. I need a Savior. Hosanna! Lord, save. Join me to yourself. Make me right before you. Make me right inside myself. Sort me out. Heal my relationships. I need you. Hosanna. Lord save.”

Jesus is the cornerstone on which our new lives can be built. Jesus is also the rock of truth against which we can wreck our lives. This is true if you’ve never been a Christian, someone joined to Christ. You can continue on your own, and never solve guilt, never solve loneliness, never solve death. Or, you can cry out to Jesus, “Lord, save! Hosanna” and discover that he answers all those questions. This is true if you’ve been a Christian forever, but you’re holding back parts of your life. Hedging your bets. Trying to have it all on your terms. That’s exhausting and futile. Peace lies just the other side of crying out, “Lord, save. Hosanna!”

In this same section, Paul refers to a passage about a stone of stumbling or a cornerstone of salvation. He declares, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. For there is no distinction between [people]. For the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call upon him. For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10” 11-13).

This makes all the difference. We can stay in ourselves and see Jesus as a rock of offense, a stumbling stone. Or we can see Jesus as the cornerstone of a new creation. The cornerstone of a living temple that rises in joy and praise. We can start counting not on ourselves, but counting on that cornerstone. And so discover that he makes us living stones built upon himself, connected to life and love and hope. For the first time ever, or for the first time after releasing something to which we’ve been clinging.

T.S. Eliot described such salvation this way: “A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.” It’s a dying in order to rise. It’s a letting go in order to receive. It’s a stepping out in the dark in order to be taken in to the light. It costs the release of that very stubborn core of yourself that you’re hanging onto. But it’s as simple as crying out from your heart, “Hosanna! Lord, save!” Jesus is passing by. He’s riding into his city. He’s coming right alongside your life. Right now. Let’s take a moment to pray and cry out Hosanna to him.