

Date: 03/28/21

Before And After

Texts: **Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11: 1-20**; from *Leprechauns on TV*, by Suzy Kassem

I have been dying to tell you all this since we signed on, but at last it's the right time for it. Kate and I just won in the Mega Millions lottery, you know, the one with the 152million dollar payout, and we decided this morning to share our blessings with you. You chose the right day be online for church. Everyone here is going to get a million dollars!!!! Think about what you will do with that money!

April Fool's! Ok, ok, it's not April Fool's day yet. Well, sorry, but it couldn't wait. I had to find some way to give you a sense of the excitement that was in the air that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem! So, no, we didn't win, and you're not getting a million dollars. Sorry. Maybe next time. But it was nice to dream for a minute, wasn't it? It got everybody excited, thinking about what might be happening, wondering whether it might just possibly be true, thinking how great it would be if it were true, how life would change. I think that might be what it was like for the crowds going out to see Jesus coming into Jerusalem.

As Jesus got closer and closer to Jerusalem, the rumors started to fly. Some said he was the Messiah. Some said he'd performed miracles. What if, what if, just what if, he was the million dollar ticket, the one who would change all their lives? People got excited. They got dreaming. People thought they were going to get something. But everybody there thought it was their own thing. People who were always one down thought that the Messiah might be coming to make them one up on the bad guys oppressing them. He's coming to confront the Romans - We'll get freedom! He's coming to take over the Temple - We'll get a more honest religion! He's coming to reveal his true identity as the heir of King David and he's going to rule the world from Jerusalem - We'll get power! He's the Messiah and he's coming in the name of the Lord God to make everything in the world come out right - We'll get justice! Everyone thought he was coming for something, just not the same thing. But, whatever he's coming to do, they thought, it's got to be something big, really big, and he'll do it at the Passover feast, and we'll all get something from it, so let's get behind him, and while we're at it, let's get ahead of him, and let's give a big Jerusalem welcome to Jesus.

So out they went that first Sunday of the Palms, and the people who had a little more and owned cloaks put their cloaks down on the road in front of Jesus so that the little donkey colt he was riding on wouldn't stir up dust with its feet and get Jesus all dusty, and those who had a little less cut palm fronds and put them down on the road for the same reason. And they all shouted "Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!" – "Save us! Save us! Save us!"

People went before him shouting it, to lead the way so that he would know where he was going and wouldn't get lost on his journey to the Temple where it would all happen. People went before him, as people often do, telling others to move out of the way, that Jesus is coming, and trying to make it look like they were a part of his entourage, making sure that they were going to be the first to see what he did when he got to the Temple, hoping he would remember them when he came in his kingdom. And others went after him, following in his wake, making up a part of the moving mob that was making its way down from the Mount of Olives where the Messiah, when he came, was going to appear, down to the Temple where the Messiah, when he revealed himself, was going to rule, according to the Scriptures.

Before him and after him, people were shouting, "Save us, save us, save us, hosanna, hosanna, hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They wanted to be saved from a lot of things, from the oppressive Romans, from the meddling priestly bureaucracy, from the exploitative tax collectors, from the poverty of their existence, from something, anyway, that wasn't right in their lives and which *someone else* was causing. Jesus was going to get that someone else, and was going to stop *them*, whoever *they* were, those people who are causing all of *us* so much trouble. The crowd expects Jesus to save them from *those people*, and to do so with power. They think he's going to be the most powerful king in the world, and that's why they are taking off their cloaks and putting them on the road so that Jesus won't get his feet dusty, just as Sir Walter Raleigh did when he took off his cloak to put over a puddle so Queen Elizabeth the First wouldn't muddy her shoes. It's something a Queen doesn't forget, nor a King either.

It's easy to understand how they could think this way. When we think of God appearing, it's always to change the world, to change other people and what they're doing. We seldom think how God's appearing might change the world by changing *us!* The people back then had those same expectations: Jesus, if he's the Messiah, is going to change the world by changing *them*, *those other people*. And Jesus was going to do it using *their* method: raw power. Scholar Charles Campbell suggests that Jesus is already trying to undercut this idea of using power to smite enemies by riding on a donkey's colt, rather than on a war horse, or even a full grown donkey. Campbell thinks that Jesus is making a parody of the militaristic parade the people want, rather like a general who chooses to ride, not in a tank at the front of the parade, but in one of those mini Shriners cars that look like souped up go karts – that's the meaning of the little donkey colt Jesus is riding, his feet likely dragging on the ground because it is so small.

Be that as it may, it's safe to say that Jesus disappointed the crowd. With so many people expecting so many different things from him, it was probably inevitable that they would go away disillusioned. But what happened was really stunningly bad, for everyone. Why it was almost as if Jesus had no interest in dealing with *those other* people that were causing so many problems.

The text tells us that the parade took Jesus right to the Temple, that the crowd marched him proudly there, and when he arrived, he got off his donkey, ... and he looked around, ... and ... then ... he went home! All that other stuff, the overturning of tables and so forth, that happens

the next day! I hope you heard that in the text this morning. On Palm Sunday itself, the text tells us Jesus just looked around, then went home, or out to Bethany where he was staying, anyway. What the heck! Um, Jesus, didn't you skip a step there somewhere? Weren't you supposed to *do something* at the Temple on Palm Sunday? Like *anything* at all! Weren't you supposed to get *them*? Use power? Blow things up?

The problem was that the people were marching after Jesus and ahead of him, behind and before, but they weren't marching with him, they weren't looking for him to do anything to change *them* just to change other people. They wanted him to work the system, to work with power and violence. They wanted him to do some smiting of their enemies, but had no interest in him changing their own lives. It never occurred to them that the point of the procession was not getting to Jerusalem, that the real point the procession itself, being near Jesus. Just like the destination of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is irrelevant—does anyone really know where it ends up?—the point isn't the destination, but the parade! Jesus wants the people to see him, riding in humility. He wants them to see rich folks with cloaks celebrating with poor folks with palm branches. He wants to show that there can be an expectation of God at work even under oppression. He wants to show that being around him is itself a celebration where everything seems right, even without smiting of enemies.

The problem with the smiting viewpoint is that Jesus came, not just to save us, but to save them, too. And he wants us to change the people we can most easily change first: ourselves. Save us, they cried out, yes, but save us from them, not from ourselves, not from *our* sins, not from *our* misplaced desires, not from *our own* misshapen lives, but from them, from the bad guys who are wrecking everything. It's not that Jesus approves of oppression, of slavery, of vast inequalities of wealth and privilege. His parables, his stories, his life all demonstrate that. But he's not going to solve those problems by dividing humanity into good and bad and smiting the bad. Instead, he's going to leave his followers to deal with those issues. He's going to leave behind people whose lives have been changed because they marched with him, whose lives are being reshaped to become more like him, who are dedicated to being God's renewed people on the earth. What he's about is changing those followers, reshaping their lives through the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life, though his example of service to others and love for all people. What he's about is stepping outside of the system and renouncing violence, praying for the very people who are putting him to death, allowing love to conquer hate, as Bishop Michael Curry taught us in our book study. Jesus insists that there is no *us* and *them*, but that there is only an *us*, all of us, together, guilty of putting him to death. The same crowd that cheers him on Sunday is the one that will jeer him on Friday. The same crowd that calls out "Save us" today will call out "Save yourself, if you can!" on Friday. The same crowd that was us on Sunday turned into them on Friday. All of this just shows that there is no us and them, only us, fickle, needy, faithless, loving hating us, needing salvation more than we know, not from some mythical *them* but from ourselves and our own separation from God.

What Jesus is about is taking on the consequences of *our* sins and bearing the costs himself, for us, for ever. What he's about is not finding a way for the supposed good guys to get into the kingdom of God, but in finding a way for even a crucified thief to get in. He did nothing when he got to the Temple because that's not where the action was. The action was in the parade itself, as people learned to follow Jesus. The action was in the process, not the destination, because we will always have to be improving the world, making it fairer, more just, more helpful to human flourishing. The good news of Jesus is not that the Romans will be overthrown, or that true religion will be restored to our land, or that we will be able to fill our garages and our attics with more stuff we once thought we wanted, thanks to God's checkbook.

The good news is that the prayer of every generation has been answered, that "Save us!" has received the reply "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." The good news is that Jesus left behind a group of changed people who were dedicated to changing the world with love and not with violence.

The good news, and this is what I've really been dying to tell you since we got in here, is not that Kate and I have won a hundred million bucks and we're handing it all out, but that Jesus Christ has won eternal life, and that he's handing it out to you, and you, and you, and you. The good news is, when we march with Jesus, it teaches us to dream about what the world might be like, and then being with Jesus empowers us to go out and change it, starting with ourselves. We're still part of that parade with Jesus, celebrating being with him, and being changed by his presence. By being part of the parade going with Jesus, we are changing the world.

And that's no joke!

Amen