

April 17, 2011

Palm Sunday Message
Broken Branches & Footprint Stained Coats

Gracious God, May these words be your words of grace. Amen

People from all over the world had come to Jerusalem to celebrate. The city was bustling and vibrating with energy. It was Passover. They were celebrating the way that God had led them out of their enslavement in Egypt to become a free people. It was a time of reflection and celebration. But in a way it was also bitter sweet, for this once enslaved people were slaves again. Under the crushing power of the Roman Empire they were controlled, impoverished, and they hoped and prayed every day for salvation.

On the day that we celebrate as Palm Sunday, we are told that Jesus rode into the city on a colt and a donkey. Imagine – how did he do that? Did he have one leg over the colt and one leg over the donkey, awkwardly sliding down in between them? Each animal having different strides would have made him sway in a clumsy way. This misunderstanding of Zachariah’s prophecy creates an almost comical image of this humble and yet powerful man.

As he rode into Jerusalem, a parade surrounded him. Coats were thrown on the ground. Leafy branches were laid down before him. It was better than the Macy’s Christmas Parade, the Rose Bowl and Mardi Gras combined. Jesus didn’t wrap himself in purple cloth. He didn’t ride a powerful horse. He came to Jerusalem with trust on God’s power.

“Hosanna, Hosanna”, they cried, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” “Hosanna” means “Save Us”. But these words were immediately followed by cheers of joy. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” They believed their prayers had been answered. Hosanna became an acclamation of joy. They were cheering for Jesus. He was a hit. But what did he do? According to Matthew he immediately went to the temple and tore it up. This man they had hoped would take down the Roman Empire wasn’t approaching the problem in a way they liked. He had come to Jerusalem to cause trouble. Their cheers for the conquering King fell silent. And by the end of the week he was dead. And all that was left of the parade was foot stained coats and broken branches – tears & lost hope. The Hosannas of joy turned into Hosannas of pleading – “Save us, Lord, Save us!”

They really didn’t know the depth of what they were asking for when they begged for salvation. And in times of the dark night of our souls, I’m not sure we understand the depth of love and the complexity of grace, when we ache for God’s saving hands.

Sometimes we hear the question, “Have you been saved?” from a co-worker, a street evangelist, or a church visit, and we are struck off balance. These 4 words usually have one of 4 responses. See if you can relate.

1. The date, time, place and the powerful event is shared.
2. Clueless as to the meaning behind the question, a life curdling event is shared, with a last minute rescue. I love to tell the story of getting caught in quick sand, thinking it was all fun and games until I sank high up to my knees. It wasn’t so funny then. I was ever grateful to my hiking partner who was strong enough to save me, but not my boots. I

imagine my boots setting in the bottom of that sand pit. The question remains – saved from what or saved for what. The word “saved” is used so often we don’t pause to discern what that means.

3. A wall immediately goes up with a mental note, “Oh you are one of those kind of Christians.”
4. We are judged for not having that kind of experience, but you see God greets us in many ways and travels many roads to meet us.

“Have you been saved?” Those 4 words are too simple to give voice to a complex and profound journey with God.

The people gathered on that day were hoping for a hero who would save them from the Roman Empire. They also ached for someone to a right relationship with God. Through out history they had messed up big time and as a family they wanted forgiveness and a chance to start over. They saw their predicament all tied together in one package. They wanted a chance to begin again with their relationship with God.

In Howard Hangen’s book, Drink Deeply with Delight he tells of a well intentioned starry-eyed woman at a family gathering. “Have you been saved?” she asked. Her weather-worn aunt said, “I suppose I have been saved – as many as 3 times a day.... Usually I go for month without it.” “That’s not what I meant”, said the young woman. “Are you going to Heaven?”

“Yes Honey, every minute I’ve been saved, I get a taste of Heaven.” The young woman answered, “It’s not the same.” “Maybe not”, said the aunt. “But you don’t have to be Martha Stewart to know that when you receive a gift, it is tacky to turn it down because it isn’t wrapped the way it “should be””!

The early church fathers understood the root of the word “salvation” & “healing” to be the same. They saw the journey to be one of healing. And healing takes time, prayer, kindness and care. It is not a once in a lifetime event, it is a life long journey. In the movie Tender Mercies a father & son are baptized. Still dripping wet, they are walking down the road talking, “Pa, do you feel any different?” The father responded, “Not yet, not yet.”

“Hosanna”, we cry out. “Hosanna” we cheer in celebration. As we journey into the “not yet” with Christ there will be days of healing & days of pleading for wholeness.

Our brokenness limits our visions and makes our world way too small. We can’t see beyond our own pain. And we fail to be generous, kind, and hospitable. Our brokenness puts up a barricade. We look at the world around us and we see greed, choosing power over kindness, violence over relationships. Our individual brokenness and our societal brokenness are all tied together. We want to be made whole again. And as we ache for Christ’s healing, he meets us in our brokenness as he hangs on the cross. But, that is not the end of the story. “Hosanna”.