

Fleeting Praise
Palm Sunday, April 17, In the Year of Our LORD, 2011
First Congregation United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
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Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus knew. Jesus knew *exactly* how it was all going to play out. Our first inkling comes when He tells His followers to go and fetch the colt He would ride into the city of Jerusalem. If asked what they were doing untying the colt, these disciples were to reply, "The LORD has need of it." He knew that was all it would take. The colt's owner would not question the request and would simply acquiesce to apparent strangers.

Jesus knew. He knew *exactly* how the events of the week would unfold. The easy procurement of the colt was a harbinger. Jesus knew the triumphal ride into Jerusalem was ironic, incongruous to all else to transpire in the week to come. He *knew* that all too many of the crowd who shouted "Hosannas" -... well, He knew that another word would be on their lips within days, that "crucify" was as distant along the spectrum of praise that one could get and that the praise, the "Hosannas" were fleeting. Now let us be clear. The crowd was correct ... He was the "One Who came in the name of the LORD" ... but their reasons – well, they could not have been more wrong!

What was He thinking? He knew the foolishness and shallowness of this crowd. He knew the agenda behind the energy that caused people to place their cloaks and leafy branches on the road upon which the colt would step. He knew the praise was fleeting and He knew the foolishness, ... no, I need to stop there and name this fleeting praise for what it was and often still is

Jesus knew the parade of palms and "Hosannas!" were not only fleeting but was *self-serving*. His most trusted followers, those twelve men He called His disciples – had they not displayed the same foolishness? How often that had debated, even argued, over which one of them would sit at Jesus' right and left hands when He started His reign! How often they had connected their trip to Jerusalem and their idea of Jesus' Messiah-ship with the restoration of those glory days when David had ruled! How often they had failed to hear what Jesus was saying when He told them – over and over and over again, that He was going to Jerusalem and that it meant He would be rejected and killed!

If the disciples didn't "get it," if they succumbed to selective hearing – more than happy to hear and use words like "Messiah" and "LORD" – but equally happy to ignore admonitions like "the first shall be last" and "you must be a servant to all" and "the cost of discipleship," if these men who followed Jesus for three years did not fully understand the true message of the good news, what are we to expect of that crowd?

If the disciples did not grasp the true meaning of Jesus' Messiah-ship, how could this crowd, on what we call the "Day of Palms," be expected to be less foolish? Jesus' Kingdom wasn't about the restoration of David's secular throne. It wasn't about military might that would get rid of those Romans. It wasn't about raw political power and influence. Jesus was all about a change of heart, a reorientation of personal goals and agenda. Jesus' message was about love and service of others, living in the ways of peace, grace, hope, faith, forgiveness and reconciliation – reconciliation with other people, with God and with oneself.

Jesus' kingdom, Jesus' reorientation was about looking beyond who one could blame for one's situation. The people of Jesus' day blamed the Romans, blamed Jews who worked on behalf of the occupiers as tax collectors or enforcers of Roman law. They were good at the "blame game," but Jesus wondered at what point they would look in the proverbial "mirror" and realize that to change the world they might want to start with themselves, that to change the priorities of a society that associated success with power, wealth, military might, possessions, if not physical prowess – that they might need to start with their own lives and start living as Jesus would have them – in humility before God, with kindness and love towards others, and with efforts to be just, gracious, honest, forgiving, loving and peaceable in all aspects of their own lives.

How foolish were these palm waving, cloak dropping, "Hosanna!" yelling people! Didn't they have an inkling of what was to transpire? Did they not remember what the powers-that-be of Jerusalem had done to all of the prophets who had come before? Had they now paid attention to how Jesus had debated these leaders, made them look foolish, how He had angered them? Was the crowd really that naïve? Were they really that foolish? Was their praise really to be that fleeting?

Let me be fair. The crowds on the "Day of Palms" have a built-in excuse. They did not *know* that four days later, on the Day of Passover, Jesus would celebrate what we now call the "Last Supper." They did not know that the day after that they would be enticed to yell "crucify Him!" and that He would then die on a cross. I suppose I should ease up when I accuse *them* of foolishness and fleeting praise.

But once again there is a pesky "but" - ... but what about us? What is our excuse for fleeting praise and foolish ignorance of the reality of what transpired during what we call "Holy Week?" We have "20-20 vision" and the "gift" of hindsight. We know what happened in that ensuing week. What excuse do we have if our praise of God is so fleeting as to be reserved for Sunday mornings and forgotten at all other times or if we, like the people of Jesus' day invest all of our hopes and energy in military power, economic or political power or the drive to succeed as the world defines "success" and, in the process, miss Jesus' call to discipleship?

What excuse do we have if "Hosannas!" and praise of God is all about who is getting into an exclusive "heaven" from which others are excluded? What if some of the questions posed in the edition of TIME magazine that arrived yesterday have any degree of validity – that incessant talk of "heaven" and "hell" in the "great beyond" are used as tools to get people to "toe the line" and scare the bejeemies out of people – instead of recognizing that a bit of heaven can be

found here on earth and that people can live in the equivalent of “hell” – at times a “hell” of their own making and all too often the doing of others?

The movie we watched here in the Sanctuary yesterday afternoon, “As It Is In Heaven,” a Swedish movie about a church choir as led by a now ill but formerly world-famous orchestra conductor contains some “adult scenes” including domestic violence – but how it spoke to the theme of “heaven” as it can be found on earth! This was a group of people with petty peeves, ignorant biases, pride and prejudice common to all humans. But in the end, they were a community of faithful, responsive, loving, caring, honest persons who found praise of humanity if not the Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God not in the rituals of “church” – but in the wonder of communion, of family, of reconciliation that was as much a sacrament as Baptism and Holy Communion are when seen not as “rites” but as expressions of the good news that is ours as sisters and brothers in faith – a good news that is not fleeting but enduring, not grounded in what we might get in exchange for praise of God but how we might be agents of God’s love that mirrors that praise.

So ... what excuse do we have if our “hosannas” today are fleeting – or about getting into a future heaven instead of trying to create a bit of heaven for ourselves and others here on earth? What excuse do we have if in this coming “Holy Week” we happily skip from a celebratory “Days of Palms” to the even more joyous “Day of Resurrection” – and don’t even think of the tragic, ironic, and incredible poignancy of all that transpired in the days between? I give people who don’t attend Adult Bible Class tomorrow of the services on Thursday or Friday an “out.” If you don’t read the last chapters of any of the Gospels, at least *think* about the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus’ arrest, Paul’s denial in the courtyard, Jesus’ trial, His walk to Golgotha, His words and finally His death on a cross and the burial in a tomb ...

We have no excuses like the ones we might give to those in the crowd on that day in Jerusalem. We *know* what Jesus’ message is *not* and what it *is*: the transformation of hearts, a change in orientation and priorities. Jesus’ kingdom, the one on earth, the one in heaven, the one on earth that occasionally mirrors the one in heaven are about family, service, love, grace, hope, faith, forgiveness, reconciliation, sacrifice and peace. If we think anything else, then we add weight to the human tragedy of not getting God’s message right, of participating in fleeting praise which in the end is of no value and might as well have not been expressed at all!

The good news is that we *do* get it right – embrace those genuine gifts of God and share in proclaiming the good news that is ours in Christ!

Amen.