

John Sampson
"Caught In The Middle"
Text: Matthew 21:1 - 11
Preached at KVCC
April 5, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Hosanna, hosanna in the highest!

We have been following Jesus since his birth, following the stories that have swirled around him since we first turned on the star in our sanctuary, and began building our crèche in expectation of his arrival, in expectation of his Advent.

At Christmas we heard him proclaimed as Prince of Peace, and Light of the World, and King. But what did these words mean? How would this child grow into these exalted titles, and daydreams?

And then he opened his mouth, and we finally heard him speak. Sitting on top of a mountain, he told us that the poor of spirit would be blessed, and those who mourn will be comforted. He opened his mouth and gave us a new constitution to found a new kind of community not at the end of time, but right here, right in the middle of this time.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace because he offers a peace that, just as MLK described, roils on the surface because it is building a community based on the common humanity and sacredness of all people.

Jesus is the Light of the World because his teaching brings into the light of our consciousness all of those we have forgotten to care for, and throws a light into our hearts to show us why we haven't cared.

And when you heard the story of Jesus healing the blind man, of charging us with a ministry of healing in this world that is so sick and literally dying, was it possible, even just a little bit, to accept the sovereignty of Jesus's teaching? Could Jesus's words become "king" to us in the sense that we would take up his challenge and center our lives around the power of the great commandment to love God with everything we have, and then to love each other in just the same way?

Peace, and light, and healing and love: these are the ways of living that Jesus offers us, and asks us to commit to.

And for a moment we do.

That is what today's story is all about: that one beautiful moment when we can feel like the gospel, the good news, might just be within our grasp, finally, after all of the millennia of waiting, maybe, just maybe, our world can change, and be different.

And how might we respond?

Would we shout out, "Open the gates, and let this new world in?"

Would we wave green branches, filled with life, to celebrate?

Would we shoot off fireworks, and call a holiday, a holy day?

Would we crowd the streets to be able to just catch just a glimpse of the teacher who showed us how this dream of all dreams could be made real?

Would we too say hosanna, hosanna in the highest?

My favorite moment in all of the operas I have seen is the ending of Wagner's opera Das Rheingold. In those final moments the gods have secured their new home, tricked the evil giants, released a cursed ring, and now triumphantly enter their castle together and united. It is a moment of dreams realized, and hopes come true.

And then it happens.

From offstage, from down below, comes the song of the Rheinmaidens whose gold had been stolen, and they announce that the story isn't over, and that all of the hopes and dreams of the gods will be shattered, and turned to dust.

At the moment when our hearts can embrace our teacher's vision of a life, and a world, founded on true blessing, as we say within our souls the great hosannas, as we triumphantly approach the gates of love, can you hear it?

It starts out soft, because it comes from far away.

But it's unmistakable; it's the sound of another procession, a procession coming from the west, an imperial parade that carries with it dreams of peace, but peace attained through violence and control. It carries with it an embrace of sovereignty, not the sovereignty of healing and of love, but of a political system that accepts the oppression of millions as a given from a god that looks exactly like the Emperor.

Jerusalem, the place we have come to, the place Jesus has led us, is the meeting place of these two processions. I call this place Jerusalem, but I could also call it our human heart. Because it is within us that the competing powers of compassion and selfishness meet; it is

within our hearts that the rivals of equality and privilege crash into each other. And the story that we will hear this week tells us that we may have entered Jerusalem on the side of love, but at some point we will abandon it, and spit on it, torture it, and kill it. At some point when we're asked we won't be yelling out hosanna any longer; we'll yell out crucify.

The story of Holy Week, the week we enter today, isn't a story that can be told in one reflection, or in one gathering. It is the story of a lifetime. Because it is the story of our human heart, in all of its complexity, in all of its darkness, and in all of its beautiful radiance. It is a story that takes courage to hear, and courage to admit how we participate in it. It is a story that leads us to the cross, but a story that does not stop there.

So I invite all of you, even as our palm fronds are slipping from our hands, come and journey this week together in community, in faith, and in hope, never denying the tragedy unspooling before us, but with the assurance that new life is God's unending promise.

Amen.