

March 25, 2018

They Went Out To Meet Him

Matthew 21:1-10 and Psalm 103

Three times a year all Jewish males were to go to Jerusalem for special festivals. One of those festivals was the Festival of Unleavened Bread which lasted seven days. As recorded in the Gospels Passover took place during this week.

Some commentators today believe maybe hundreds of thousands of people from Judea and elsewhere were gathered in Jerusalem. Why would some go out to see a man riding into the city on a donkey? Had they heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead?

What was it that excited people enough to go out to meet this nondescript man? What would move these men and women to throw their cloaks on the pavement?

This morning we have gathered to worship on what we call Palm Sunday. It is only in the Gospel of John that palm branches are mentioned. Palms did not grow around Jerusalem and must have been brought up from Jericho the closest place they grew. To both Greeks and Romans palm branches were a sign of victory.

They went out to meet him: why? I think it was the same hunger, the same longing, we have today. We want to be cared for by someone who really means it: Someone who will care for us no matter how we respond: Someone who will not leave us for any reason, including death.

We long to have someone care about us for no other reason than because we are alive. We want someone to care about us not because we behave in a certain way or our social position, but just because we exist. We want someone who thinks we are important; that we are special.

I want to know someone cares about me. You want to know someone cares about you. Well, God does care about you. God cares about me. Because God cares about us Jesus entered Jerusalem that day. He was seated on a donkey; riding through a crowd of people just like us. They longed to have someone who would never stop caring about them.

The people, the crowds, had heard about this Jesus. Only a few days earlier he had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. They wanted someone to care that much about them: someone who cared enough to raise a friend from the dead. They went out to meet him.

PRAYER: O God we long to be cared for, to be loved because we are. Lord help us to see Jesus on this Palm Sunday. Open the eyes of our understanding so we may comprehend the height and the depth of your mercy. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Savior.

We want someone to care so much about us that we will not perish but have eternal life. If the wages of sin is death we need someone who raises the dead. Today we know God has raised this man, Jesus, from the dead. Will we go out to meet him?

John recorded "The great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord--the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (John 12:12-15)

And they went out to meet him.

The people who had been with Jesus when he called Lazarus out of the tomb had told others. Was it because they had heard he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. Whatever stirred the people deeply disturbed the religious leaders. The Pharisees said to one another, "You see, we can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" (John 12:15-19)

The people wanted to be cared for by someone with power.

We want to be cared for by someone who knows all about the sin which kills us. We want to be cared for by someone who wants us to have life, and to have it abundantly.

Palm Sunday is a day of choices. It is about how Jesus enters the hearts of people. It was their choice then and it is our choice today.

Do you join with them this morning? Do we shout hosanna? Hosanna is Greek and means “save now”. The crowd shouted out. The words they shouted are recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

They shouted “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel.” (John 12:13)

“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38)

Others shouted out "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matthew 21:9)

While still others cried out "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel. Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Mark 11:9-10)

We have all seen motorcades. Even 2,000 years ago entry processions were important. They displayed political and/or military power. This entry into Jerusalem was the beginning of the world being turned upside down. Jesus did not, and does not, seek political or military power.

He came as the Lamb of God, our Savior, and he rode a donkey. A king riding a donkey showed humble concern for the people. It was a custom in the near East but not Rome. Jesus rode as a humble servant, not a warrior.

This entry involved Messianic expectations. Matthew recorded Jesus was fulfilling the 500 year old prophecy found in Zechariah (9:9) “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The Bible records that “When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this man?" The crowd was saying “this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. Many went out to meet him. We are like them: we can choose to go out and meet him or not.

Can you picture this procession? Jesus is astride the donkey with his legs dangling. The foal follows. Underfoot the road has clothing laying on it. There are palm branches in the road and being waved. This is Jesus, the outpouring of God's grace in his son. This is our Redeemer.

In Psalm 103 the Psalmist began with these words "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name." What does it mean for us to bless the Lord? The Psalmist knew that to bless the Lord means to kneel as an act of adoration.

"The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." (Psalm 103:10)

God tells us that his "thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways his ways. The Lord says "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)

We want God to punish evil doers and reward the faithful. This is how we want other people treated: punish evil doers and reward those we call good people. We do this because we think of ourselves as one of the "good people".

We think God deals with people according to our sin. Thank God that he does not. We are human and God has chosen to deal graciously with us. God cares about each of us as individual people whether or not we think ourselves a sinner or a saint.

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12)

What do we cry? Hosanna, save now. Or crucify this man, the embodiment of God's grace. If we do not shout hosanna our only choice is crucify this Jesus. We cannot do both. If not "hosanna", people today may not scream crucify. But they must do something with him and the words he spoke.

Life is fleeting. They heard that this man had raised Lazarus from the dead. Do we long to touch the everlasting, the eternal? If not for us, do we desire this for our children? What we do makes a difference far beyond our own lives.

“As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.”  
(Psalm 103:15-18).

God pities us because he knows how we are formed. God pities us because he knows the dust from which we are made (Psalm 103: 14). And God pities us because he knows how frail we are.

It is the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus who was on this donkey that makes it possible for us to choose God's grace; to choose life over death.

This opportunity is confirmed by presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of millions of women, men, and children who over centuries have chosen to believe. We know the promise has been made, accomplished, and given to us so God may pour out his grace on us rather than judgement.

The beginning and the end of Psalm 103 tie us to eternity.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.”  
Bless the Lord all that is in me: all that is in me is called self.

And we are joined with eternity in the last verses of Psalm 103. “Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

Jesus, on a donkey, was God incarnate. His words and acts demonstrate the amazing readiness of God to forgive us: Not only to forgive but to blot out all our transgression.

The people of Jerusalem thought they would best be cared for by a conquering king but God loved them and God knows we all need a Savior. We now know this man on the donkey is the Lamb of God. Within a week he would die so we will live. In perfect mercy and justice our God cared about you and me before we were born.

The need to be cared for is deep within each of us. We all have a sense of what it means to care about another person and what it means for another person to care about us.

God looks right at us and he loves you and he loves me. He looks past the ugliness of our sin and sees Christ Jesus on the cross. He raised Christ from the dead. The tomb is empty. We are saved from the wrath our sin deserves. This is called salvation. We can choose to be children of a holy God.

Do you see yourself as forgiven? Do you see the cross now empty? Do you see the empty tomb? Do you see Christ Jesus as Lord and raised from the dead.

God raised Christ from the dead therefore we can do what God puts in our hearts to do. We demonstrate love by caring. Caring is learned. We learn from example. If we comprehend how much God cares for us, if we understand the care we see in Jesus, then we can begin to understand how to care for others.

God cares about us. He has cared about us since the foundation of the world. God has cared about you since the day you were conceived.

God calls us to care about others. Jesus says look to him. He shows us how to care for each other and gives us the strength to do it.

Jesus says look to him because he loves us. Jesus says look to him because he loves them.

Look to him because he has overcome. Jesus says look to him and he will give us his heart. He will give us his forgiveness. He will give us his grace. He will let us know how much he cares for each of us and for all people.

Hosanna or crucify. They went out to meet him. Do we go out to meet him?

Between this day of hosannas and palm branches and the end of the week  
Jesus would be lifted up on a cross.

We will gather again next Sunday, Easter, to celebrate our risen Lord.

Christ is raised from the dead. God made a promise and his care for you is a  
sure thing. Nothing can separate us from the love of the Lord.

Tell the good news of God's love. Christ is alive. God cares all the time!  
And all the time God cares!! Everyone can choose to go out to meet him.