

Christ As King in the Time of Corona
Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29; Matthew 21:1–11
Sunday, April 5, 2020 (Palm Sunday)

So today is Palm Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus' triumphant arrival into the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. As he rides in on a donkey, people are lining the street, waving palm branches – which were a symbol of victory for the Israelites, like their state flower – and shouting, “Hosanna to the son of David,” meaning *King* David, and there are other gospels that have the crowd chanting, “Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!”

This is a reenactment of the enthronement of a *king* as it takes place throughout the Old Testament; they do these same things (wave palm branches, lay their cloaks on the road, and chant these words). The people are proclaiming Jesus as the King of Israel. I've compared this before to Inauguration Day, when we swear in a new president, and then there is a procession, a parade, from the Capitol to the White House as the people line the streets and cheer. This is Jesus' inaugural parade.

Every year we read this story, and this day is like a big celebration in the midst of the somberness of Lent, as we prepare for the *ultimate* celebration next week on Easter Sunday. But it strikes me this year that such a celebration would not be able to take place. Not counting the crowd, Jesus and his disciples make for a group of 13, too many for a public gathering as we shelter in place. After Jesus arrives in the city, he goes to the temple, which at that time was full of people – money changers, those who are buying and selling animals for sacrifices – but today would be *empty*. If Jesus entered Jerusalem *today*, would anyone be there to see it? Would anyone celebrate it? Would anyone know?

It reminds me of a picture that I saw last week of Pope Francis, sitting in St. Peter's Square, which was totally empty, as he offered a blessing to the city and the world. He said in the blessing, "For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets, and our cities; it has taken over our lives. The pandemic has reminded us that we are all in the same boat. And now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: wake up, Lord!" He's alluding there to the story of Jesus calming the storm. Jesus and his disciples are out in a boat when a storm pops up and threatens to overwhelm and sink the boat. The disciples are terrified, but Jesus has fallen asleep. So they say to him, "Wake up, Lord! Do you not care that we are perishing?!" Jesus wakes up and makes the storm stop. The implication there is that, as Jesus had power over *that* storm, he has power over *this* one and can make the storm of this pandemic stop. But I think that framing it in that way brings us back to this false dichotomy of: if God is the King of Heaven and earth, either God *has* the power to stop this virus and God *will*, or God has the power to stop it and God *won't*. That framing of this situation doesn't *work*.

So I want to ask instead, on *this* Palm Sunday, what does it mean for Christ to be celebrated as *king* during the time of corona? And I want to approach that question by looking at three words.

The first word is found in verse 10 of Matthew's story. It says that "when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'" That word *turmoil* is the Greek word *seio*. It literally means, "to shake, to agitate, to cause to tremble, to quake for fear." It's used only a couple of other times in scripture to talk about earthquakes or people being so afraid that they literally shake. So the city is *shaking*. It is *agitated*. It is *trembling* and *quaking* for fear. It is *unstable* and *turbulent*. *Our* cities are agitated and unstable and turbulent right now. People are on edge. They are uncertain and afraid. And yet, it is into the midst of that shaking, quaking, turbulent turmoil that Christ enters our cities as king. Christ comes into the midst of the

agitation and instability and fear. And *our* question today is the same as theirs – *who is this?*
What does he come to *do*? What *can* he do?

That leads us to our *second* word, *hosanna*. This is a Hebrew word that we chant every year at this time or sing in hymns. The crowd chants it to Jesus when he enters the city, “Hosanna to the son of David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” So we have *heard* this word a lot, but do we know what it *means*? We see it in the Psalm that was read earlier. The psalmist cries out in verse 25, “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord,” and that phrase *save us* is the Hebrew word *hosanna*. *Hosanna* means “save us.” As Jesus enters the city, the crowd is crying out, “Save us!” Save them from *what*?

When the people of Israel talked about the Messiah, they talked about an actual *king* who would sit on an actual *throne* and lead an army that would deliver them from their enemies. In Jesus’ time Israel was occupied and ruled by the Romans. They had no control over their own country, and the Romans were very harsh and oppressive. So the people of Israel in the time of Jesus thought that the Messiah would be a king who would raise up an army to defeat and drive out the Romans. The Messiah would physically save them from their enemies.

For the people of Israel, all throughout the Old Testament, salvation was a concrete, physical thing. They needed to be saved from something real and immediate – enemies, danger, death. So when they cry out *Hosanna*, they are crying out for God to save them from immediate danger and death. When *we* talk about salvation today, we typically do so in *spiritual* terms. Salvation is something that happens in our *hearts*, in our *minds*, in our *souls*. The salvation that we talk about is not so much *immediate* as it is *eternal*. We are saved from our *sins*. And I’m not discounting that understanding of salvation. That is *real* and *necessary*.

But for Americans in the 21st century, we have rarely had to think of God's salvation in immediate, physical terms. Maybe someone who has cancer and is praying for healing – to be *saved* from that disease – or someone who is struggling with an addiction and is crying out to God to break that power over them. But for the most part, we have relatively easy lives, far from the threat of immediate danger and peril. All of a sudden, though, we find ourselves in a very different place, living in fear of an invisible threat that seems to be everywhere. All of a sudden, God's salvation has become very *physical* for us. Save us from *this virus*. Preserve our lives.

Here's the thing, though. When the crowd on that first Palm Sunday cried out *Hosanna*, they were expecting a *physical* salvation from their Romans enemies. But that's not what happened. Jesus *saved* them, but in a different way. He subverted their expectations of salvation by bringing about a *spiritual* salvation. For so long we have thought about salvation in *spiritual* terms, and now we are in need of *physical* salvation. How might God be subverting *our* expectations of salvation? What does it look like now for Christ to *Hosanna*, save us?

That brings us to our third word. It's a word that is *not* found in our scripture readings, but is nonetheless very *present* for us today. Our third word is *corona*. Do you know *why* it is called the Coronavirus? I want to show you another picture. This is a microscopic image of a Coronavirus cell. Coronaviruses are named for their appearance. Under a microscope, the virus looks like it is covered with pointed structures that surround it like a corona. *Corona* is the Latin word for *crown*. So the virus looks like a spiky, pointed crown.

Let me show you another picture. When Jesus is crucified, he is mockingly referred to as the King of the Jews, and they place on his head a crown made of thorns. A spiky, pointed corona.

What this reminds us of is that the crown that our king wears is not a crown of glory or power – gold encrusted with jewels. Our king wears a crown of *suffering*. Because the way that this king *saves* us is not through acts of violence and vengeance and power; defeating our enemies. Christ the King saves us through *suffering*. Suffering *for* us, giving his body and his life over to the human desire for vengeance and violence, and forgiving us in the process. And suffering *with* us, entering fully into our world, the turmoil of our cities and our lives, sharing our pain, our fear, our doubts, our temptations, our isolation, so that God is *with us* in *all* of that.

Christ does not save us *from* suffering. Nowhere in all of scripture are we promised that. In fact, Christ promises us the exact *opposite*. He says that those who want to follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross, and suffering and death may be the cost. Christ does not save us *from* suffering, Christ saves us *through* suffering – suffering *for* us and suffering *with* us. And we are *reminded* of that in this meal that we are about to share.

I came across a poem this week by J. Barrie Shepherd in which he writes:

Corona, the word echoes and re-echoes
through these days. *Corona*, ancient Latin for a crown –
and “uneasy lies the head...” all heads that wear it.
Recalls us, if we hearken, to another jagged headpiece
pressed brutal down across the broken brow of one
who mended lepers, bore away the festerings
and plagues that cursed our mortal race and –
in this very season – wrought a healing and a cure
that may yet bring final close to every isolation,
tear down the narrow walls of quarantine,
and seat us, newly welcomed, round
a common table where fresh bread is broken,
rich new wine is generously poured.¹

What does it mean for Christ to be celebrated as king in the time of corona? It means that Christ enters into the turmoil of our cities and our lives and saves us by suffering with us; that as we cry

¹ J. Barrie Shepherd, “Breaking News,” <https://pres-outlook.org/2020/03/breaking-news/>

out, “Hosanna,” we find our salvation in his body broken and his blood shed, and we remember that we are not alone, especially now. That Christ is with us, even in our suffering, and that as we gather round this table, through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, *we are with each other*, drawn out of our isolation and our fear to find the healing that we need in the very Body of Christ. Amen.