

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church  
Rev. William L. Love  
Sunday, April 5, 2009

## HOSANNA

Isaiah 50:4-9a  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Mark 11:1-11

A playwright once observed that *hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*. (The full quote is: Heaven hath no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned.) If the incident that occasioned this remark were still fresh in his mind, he could recount in great detail the fury the scorned woman in question had vented, which he probably deserved. I'm sure that, if you got that playwright in a quiet moment, he would admit that he had somewhat overstated his case.

If this same playwright had been around to see the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the events that occurred during the following week, he might have observed that *hell hath no fury like an expectant crowd disappointed*. Again, he would have overstated his case. The fury present during Holy Week did not exceed the fury of Hell. Rather, it was precisely the fury of hell that fell upon Christ.

It all began innocently enough — or so it seemed. Jesus had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jews from all over Palestine made the same journey. Quite unremarkable.

Outside Jerusalem, Jesus sent two of his disciples to find a colt and bring it back to him. Jesus sat on the colt and began to ride toward Jerusalem. The people who saw him were people who had come to celebrate the time God had delivered them from slavery. They ached for the time God would fulfill his promise to David to establish a kingdom that would have no end.

Each day confronted them with visible reminders that they had become a weak people. Each Roman soldier reminded them their land was occupied and controlled by foreigners. They lived a life of compromise and accommodation each day.

On this day, they see Jesus, whom they knew at least by reputation, and he was riding a colt, just the way the prophet Zechariah had told them their king would come to them.

The parade into Jerusalem was not well-organized by a planning committee that had worked for months. It was spontaneous. There were no clear lines separating the units in the parade from the spectators. Indeed, the spectators joined in the parade. The grand marshal did not sit in a new convertible. Through the streets of Jerusalem, he rode a donkey that had never been ridden.

If this were a movie, the music we would hear might be the great religious of Bach — not played on a large pipe organ suited for a cathedral but rather played on a steam calliope sitting on the back of a horse-drawn circus wagon.

Nothing seems to fit neatly together. It was both a religious ritual and a circus-like parade. It was a great joy, and, finally for those people who joined in, the grand marshal would be a great disappointment.

*Hell hath no fury like an expectant crowd disappointed.*

These people had been told they were the chosen people of God in the world. And their history was filled with events that may have made them wonder about that at times.

They had become a people in Egypt. They were slaves with little sense of community and kinship beyond the common experience of slavery.

God chose them and led them to freedom. By the power of God, they became one people, a nation.

In the Promised Land, they felt they needed a king. No longer willing to depend solely upon a God whom they could not see, they wanted a king whom they could see to lead them.

God gave them Saul, then David. The nation grew in power, wealth, and influence. They grew to trust themselves and their king, rather than God.

After the death of Solomon, the good times were gone. The nation made one by God divided against itself.

King after king came and went. The divided nation grew weaker. The people of the northern kingdom were taken captive by the Assyrians. Later, the people of the southern kingdom were taken captive by the Babylonians. The best and the brightest of their leaders were taken into Exile.

The people began to expect a Messiah. God would send his anointed one. A king in David's line, the greatest of all kings. God's own chosen one to set God's people free from all captivity forever.

Israel was a weak nation, always under the domination of whomever happened to be conquering the world at the time.

About 150 years before the birth of Christ, the people thought perhaps the Messiah had finally come. The land was under the control of the Syrians. One family rose up to lead the people in revolt against their Syrian masters: the family of Judas Maccabeas. For almost 100 years, Israel was free to rule itself.

But in 63 BC, the Roman ruler Pompey captured Jerusalem. Once more the people of Israel were captives inside their own land. More than once, the Temple was desecrated by having idols placed in it, Roman idols and images of the Caesars.

Once the people went to the Roman governor at his palace and pleaded with him to remove the idols. He refused and order this soldiers to remove this crowd of hundreds of people, forcibly, if necessary.

The people refused to move. Suddenly, the people fell to their knees, bent their heads to the ground, bared the backs of their necks, and told the Roman governor, *Kill us all, if you wish! We will not leave until the idols are removed from the Temple!*

The governor gave in to their demands. Soon, however, the idols were back in the Temple. Again, the people made their demands. Again, they refused to leave and bared their necks. This time the governor was prepared and killed many of them. The rest were forced to flee for their lives.

The hope for a Messiah — sent from God, who would set his people free from all this oppression forever — meant so much to them. It gave them hope for living.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God to be at hand. This meant one thing: the overthrow of the Romans and the re-establishment of the kingdom set up by David.

In Christ, they saw (or wanted to see) an end to their frustrations, an end to their national shame, an end to their compromise and accommodation. In Christ, they saw (or wanted to see) the one whom they expected as King.

Everyone was excited. Perhaps now those Romans would get what's coming to them. Their expectations were high.

They never stopped to think that God's way might be different from their ideas, that God's kingdom might be different from their vision for their country.

The parade fizzled out in a hurry. There was nothing left for them to do but drift away

and go back to their daily routine.

The crowd saw and were disappointed.

There seems to be something about human beings. The more we place our hopes and desires in something or someone the more we are disappointed when we think that it has failed us. The more of ourselves we give to something, the more angrily and bitterly we react when we feel that we have been let down.

It doesn't seem to matter that maybe our expectations were false. That maybe we should offer comfort or seek understanding. Even our God will sometimes seem to disappoint us.

The crowd did come back. Only this time, they did not shout, *Hosanna!* They cried out, *Crucify him!*

*Hell hath no fury like an expectant crowd disappointed.*

As the parade drew near to Jerusalem, Jesus could see the city. He looked at Jerusalem and the Temple. And he wept.

It was not that tears welled up in his eyes or that a few ran silently down his face. Jesus sobbed. He wept out loud. His body shook from the force of his crying. He could be seen and heard.

The crowd laughs in human self-confidence. The King cries because he knows human inadequacy.

Christ weeps over the city because they do not know who the Holy Visitor is or why he visits.

The crowd wants what they think they need. And they think Jesus will give them what they want.

Christ weeps because what they want is not what they need. They do not know the things that make for peace, *shalom*, wholeness as the tormented nation or the individual tormented souls.

The Holy Visitor came as a revelation from God. In the prophetic sense, a visitation usually came as a judgment, which recognizes a thing for what it really is. (In the recovery movement, there is a saying that *nothing can change until it becomes what it is*. Denial in any of its forms only prevents healing, wholeness, salvation.) We are not saved by putting an acceptable spin on what the human condition is. Christ's visitation recognizes what human needs really are and what it takes to meet them.

Christ speaks a judgment upon Jerusalem that it will be destroyed. The crowd wanted their city and their country to be free. Their desires kept them from seeing Christ for who he really is. Their desires, their wants separated them from God.

The judgment of destruction for Jerusalem may seem too harsh a judgment, but only because these things which separate us from God are held so dear. We cling to them so tightly.

The judgment of God is that God will remove everything that separates us from God. Even in judgment, we are blessed by God.

What do we need? What, then, are we to want? This is the time of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church's visitation.

The Holy Visitor is Christ. The visitation from Christ is not a word spoken from on high, but an act of love from the Holy One in our midst.

Our visitation does not come from the back of a donkey whose feet did not touch the earth by walking on garments and palm branches. It comes from Christ who walked dusty roads and washed disciples' feet. It does not come during a parade but on the cross and out of an empty tomb.

Christ judges our wants and meets our needs and restores us to God through forgiveness.

The crowd fell away and then came back with a vengeance. The disciples followed Christ to Jerusalem, ate the last meal with him, and fell asleep in the garden. Peter, who professes the greatest loyalty and courage, denied he ever knew Jesus.

Christ is deserted by everyone. Even, finally on the cross, he cried out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

And the fury of hell falls on our Lord.

We are a part of all that.

We are a part of the crowd who would have preferred a different kind of Christ from the one we got. We are people who have learned the ways of our world and how to succeed by depending on ourselves. And our Savior gives lie to human self-sufficiency because we cannot meet the deepest needs of our souls or achieve our own salvation.

We are people who say, *Charity begins at home*, as if it were in Scripture, when in fact Scripture witnesses to a God who lavishly gives away good gifts and does not keep his own son.

We are people who say, *God helps those who help themselves*, as if it were in Scripture, when in fact Scripture witnesses to a God who gives his Son to those who cannot help themselves, who like us are lost without Christ.

We are a part of the disciples who grow weary and fall asleep.

We are a part of Peter who talks boldly of the strength of his faith and grows timid when given the chance to do something about it.

Mostly though, we are the people Christ talked about when he said, *Father, forgive them*. Mostly, we are people who are forgiven.

Randy Taylor, who was first Moderator of the General Assembly of the reunited Presbyterian Church and Ginger's dad, was my pastor when I was in seminary. Randy told me his wife (Ginger's mom) loved to read murder mysteries. He said she always read the last chapter first, then started at the beginning. As she read, she did not have to worry about the complications of the plot and the false leads. She knew how it was going to come out.

The Christian community is like that. We are a group of people who have read the last chapter. We know how it's going to come out.

We know that, when we think we have been scorned (especially in something important to us), we will overreact as if that which disappointed us were put on earth solely to conform to our desires. We know that we will express good intentions and fail in them when we grow weary and fall asleep. We know we will grow timid in our faith and find some rationalization to excuse ourselves.

And we know these are the early complications of the plot.

We have read the last chapter. We know that waiting in every moment of our lives is God's forgiveness. And God's forgiveness gives us the power to change. God's forgiveness makes us new people.

The fury of hell fell upon our Lord, and it could not defeat him. And in Christ, when we finally trust him and seek what we need from him, it cannot defeat us.

So we can join the parade, knowing full well where it leads, and shout, *Blessed is the King who come in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!*