

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

I think one of the hardest things for parents is to see our kids or grandkids in pain. When we hear one of our kids say, Make it go away, mom; make it better, grandpa, we will do anything we can to make it better for that child...

On that first Palm Sunday, when the people of Jerusalem shouted, Hosanna, they were pleading, Make it go away, Jesus! Make it all better! Hosanna means, Save us now! Make it go away, Jesus! Make it all better! Save us from this Roman occupation...save us from poverty...save us from sickness and sorrow and suffering. Make it all go away, Jesus. We have seen you feed the hungry and heal the sick and cast out demons. Take over the throne and make all the bad things go away!

The people watching had been waiting for a Messiah, a descendant of King David, a son of David who would make everything better. At the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we see that Jesus was a descendant of King David; Jesus was a Son of David. The Jewish people were waiting for this chosen one would save them from all their enemies, who would make everything right again. And so they wonder, Is this the one?

Earlier in Matthew (12:23) Jesus heals a man who can't see or speak, and people ask about Jesus, Can this be the Son of David? In other words, is this the savior we've been waiting for? And just before he rides into town on this Palm Sunday, two blind men call out to him, Son of David, have mercy on us! They are thinking, Can Jesus be the one who will get us out of our problems?

So when Jesus rides into town, some people are thinking, Is he the Son of David we've been waiting for? We've seen him heal the sick and cast out demons and feed thousands of people. He could get the program back to where it was in its glory days! He can get the company back on its feet! He can get this nation back to the glory we once had under King David! Now all they needed was for him to pick up a sword and lead a revolution against these Roman occupiers! He'll be the king we want him to be!

We're not so different. We still give God that job description at times. God, save us now! Save our family from every illness and every harm. God, bless

my business right now. God, bless the plans we have made, even though we made them before really consulting you. Save us in those places *we* think we need saving! And if we've lived long enough, we know that sometimes the salvation God brings looks different than the one we were praying for. Sometimes it's a good thing we don't get the answer we've been praying for, because God has a better way. And on the cross, God takes the evil plans of humanity and uses them to redeem the world. God takes the worst that people can do and finds a way to redeem it.

So Jesus rides into Jerusalem, where the religious people are. And Jesus has been criticizing these religious people for having too many rules about the way you ought to conduct your life, and ignoring the needs of people around them. Too much outward show of piety, and not enough compassion and mercy. He's made some enemies. There are people who are plotting to kill him. And now he is riding into the city, into the heart of where these enemies are. The Son of David is riding into David's city, and they want to kill him. And right after this story, what does he do? He cleans out the moneychangers and merchants from the temple. He takes on the structures of power. He takes a stand.

It takes courage to go somewhere where people hate you, where they want to put you to death. But as Paul says in Philippians chapter 2, "Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross" (Phil.2:8).

Martin Luther King, Jr., on the day before he was assassinated, went to Memphis to support the sanitation workers who were striking for better conditions. He had received threats by people who didn't want segregation to end, people who didn't believe that black people were equal to white people. And he went to Memphis in spite of the threats. He gave his last speech to a group of pastors the night before he was assassinated; it's his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. Let me quote to you from the speech: "I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane, there were six of us, the pilot said over the public address system, "We are sorry for the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong with the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night."

“And then I got to Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Martin Luther King said, in spite of the threats, in spite of people who want to take my life, I will go to Memphis, I will support people God is telling me need my support; I'm not concerned about a long life. I just want to do God's will. And I might add, there is still a lot of work to do, isn't there? We too, need to take a stand against racism and the ideology of white supremacy that we see, to take a stand when people are discriminated against for their skin color or any other reason. We are all made in God's image.

Martin Luther King was following Jesus as he flew into Memphis. He flew there in spite of his fears. Jesus rides into Jerusalem, knowing that he has enemies, knowing that they are planning his death. And he may be afraid; he was fully a man, as well as being fully God, as the Creed says. But if he was afraid, he moved past his fears, and, as Paul says, he became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Most of us won't ever have to think about literally giving up our life for the sake of Jesus. We won't have death threats upon us because of a position we've taken, or an enemy we've made. But if Jesus rides into my life as my King, *there will be a cost*. There will be a cost when we need to say something in a conversation, there will be a cost when we need to confront society about injustice, there will be a cost when we refuse to go along with our peers. Why would we think there wouldn't be a cost to following Jesus, who said, Take up your cross, and follow me?

And when we invite Jesus to ride into our lives, he brings people with him we might not always like. He will invite his friends to come along. And his friends are people we might not always feel connected to.

One of the reasons religious people didn't like Jesus is because he was always hanging out with people you weren't supposed to hang out with: people who collaborated with the Roman government, and women of shady character, and people who made bad decisions, and people considered by the pure as ritually unclean, and people who didn't pray in the right ways, and foreigners.

You remember when he was criticized for that, he said, I didn't come to heal people who don't think they're sick; I came to heal people who *know* they need a doctor. Jesus said, If you don't think you have a problem, you don't need me! If you don't think your soul is sick, you don't need me! If you think you can make it on your own, you don't need me. I came for people who *know* they need some help.

Larry Norman died some years ago in Salem. He was a Christian rock singer back in the day. I remember his songs when I was a teenager. He literally started Christian contemporary music. Several years before he died he gave an interview, in which he said that the churches in his day didn't really like to have him come and sing. He had long hair and wore funky clothes and played loud music.

And Larry Norman said, I didn't really mind, because I was all about sharing Jesus with street people and drug addicts and prostitutes. Those were the kind of people that I really wanted to love in the name of Jesus. Jesus didn't call me to hang out with church people. The problem with Jesus was that he really didn't want to hang out with church people. He wanted to hang with people on the edges.

So if Jesus rides into our lives as our King, he's going to bring his friends with him, he's going to bring people he hangs out with, and some of them will be people we're not always comfortable with.

When Jesus rides into our lives, he brings people that we might not normally meet, and says, Find a way to love this neighbor. When Jesus rides into our lives, he helps us love people in ways we didn't think we could. Most of you remember when an angry father of three children, a man named Charles Roberts, walked into an Amish schoolhouse back in October, 2006 and shot

ten schoolgirls before he turned the gun on himself. He was angry at God because nine years before, he and his wife had lost their first child 20 minutes after she was born. And yes, they'd had three children since then, but he still was angry with God.

The story of this violence that was done to such peace-loving families went around the world, but the story that followed was an amazing story of forgiveness. As Jesus rode through the hearts of these Amish people, he gave them the power to reach out to the family of the gunman, and he gave them the power to forgive him for what he'd done. The Amish take the words of Jesus about forgiveness very seriously. More Amish people were at the killer's funeral than there were members and friends of the killer's family.

This letter was written from Charles Robert's family about two weeks after the killings:

To our Amish friends, neighbors, and local community: Our family wants each of you to know that we are overwhelmed by the forgiveness, grace, and mercy that you've extended to us. Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. The prayers, flowers, cards, and gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.

Please know that our hearts have been broken by all that has happened. We are filled with sorrow for all of our Amish neighbors whom we have loved and continue to love. We know that there are many hard days ahead for all the families who lost loved ones, and so we will continue to put our hope and trust in the God of all comfort, as we all seek to rebuild our lives."

Jesus rode through the lives and hearts of those Amish families, and gave them the power to forgive. Paul says in Philippians, Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, Jesus who said from the cross, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. That same mind of Jesus was in these Amish families.

This King goes to a cross. From a very political standpoint, that is the price he pays for coming up against power. Jesus confronts power, and power pushes back. But on that cross he soaks up like a sponge the sin and sorrow and suffering of the world. The disciples don't get the King they want: they

are given, and we are given, the King we need, the one who shows us how to open our hands to serve our neighbor, the one who forgives his enemies from the cross, the one who offers us forgiveness, the one who is with us when we face our own suffering. And God says, This will not be the end. I will put my stamp of approval on Jesus' life, when I raise him from the dead. This King doesn't make all of our suffering go away. This King helps us carry it. This King saves us in ways we would never expect, in this life and for the life to come. Amen.