

Matthew 21:1-11
Title
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Back in the late 80s the London Guardian ran a TV ad for their newspaper depicting the same event from different perspectives. The first shot is a skinhead, all tattooed up, with piercings running down the street. All of a sudden, he shoves a well-dressed businessman, knocking him to the ground. Your immediate reaction is that this is clearly a mugging, and the businessman is being robbed by the skinhead.

The second perspective, a slightly wider angle, shows a big black car pulls up and out of the car jump three men right behind the skinhead. Then you see the skinhead take off running, and it appears as if he's making an escape from the men—then colliding with the man in the suit. So, from this perspective one might think he is running from some people who are after him.

However, the third perspective is from above, and here the whole scenario comes into razor-sharp clarity. You see a huge crane moving back and forth, teetering on the edge of toppling over. And dangling from the crane is a giant bank safe. Just as the harness is about to give way you see the car pull up, men jump out, yell out to the skinhead, he then hurls himself towards the man in the suit, who happens to be standing directly under the safe. As the harness gives way you see the unsuspecting businessman saved by someone unexpected.

The ad closes with the statement “our newspaper gives you the right perspective.” Perspective is a powerful thing, it has the ability to reinforce the way we perceive things to be, or it also has the ability to open our eyes to the way things really are. And one of the myths that perspective addresses is the myth that we are in control. I think we all are receiving a sobering dose of perspective right now as news comes to us daily of the new developments of this virus. I found myself this week absolutely overcome with grief, the same grief that I've become acquainted with, the kind which all we can do when it arrives is allow it to pour out of you in waves of emotion.

What do we do when we're confronted with life that is outside of your control? When your reality bubble bursts? When your perspective is dramatically and maybe even violently reoriented?

Now, maybe your absolute faith in the unquestioned sovereignty of God never ever waivers. If that's the case, congratulations. But maybe you, like many, have found yourself in a moment asking: “God are you really there? Are you still in control?” The big question that a lot of us are asking these days is this: God are you really in control and can we trust you? This question, these thoughts are really what is at stake in our celebrations on Palm Sunday.

Now if we had the ability to be together today in the sanctuary, what you would see and hear are the children leading us into worship with palm branches and shouts of hosanna (literally “Lord Save us”), blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. And this is such an adorable and joyful experience—one that Lord willing we will be able to join together in once again next year. But what does it take for us to really say this and know that it is a part of the DNA of our life and our faith? Again, what is our perspective?

And to get at this, to gain yet a little more perspective as to what Jesus heard and felt as the shouts of Hosanna rang on that first Palm Sunday 2000 years ago, we needn't go to the first Palm Sunday, but back another 500 years to an earlier time, a time of deep instability and unrest.

For over 40 years Israel had lived as exiled people, carried violently off from their homeland, their city destroyed, the temple decimated, a people dislocated, now living in Babylon under the authority of a foreign king who didn't care much for the customs and history, let alone the covenant promises made to Israel by God. We learn about this period of exile in the Prophet Jeremiah.

But then in 539 BC the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians and among the changes made by the Persian King Cyrus was an edict that allowed for displaced peoples to return to their homelands and restore their communities, their customs, practices and places. For the Israelites this meant a return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the walls of the city, and rebuild the temple.

You can read about this edict by Cyrus in the book of Ezra, in chapter 1

In the first year of Cyrus King of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

²“Thus says Cyrus King of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

A ray of hope was issuing forth for God's people, hope was on the move.

But it was a tenuous hope, hope not without its own complexities.

You see with the Edict of Cyrus, and the return of Israel to Jerusalem they did not find an empty city, waiting for re-habitation. There were people who continued to live in Jerusalem and new peoples had moved in and built homes and lives there in their absence. So firstly, the arrival of Israel back in Jerusalem was not celebrated by everyone—there was tension with these refugees returning to their homeland.

Then as construction of the temple began it too was met with mixed emotions. For some, those who had never known the glory of the first temple, Solomon's temple, this was their first experience with a place, a location that would house the Glory of God, and it was amazing. This new guy has great new ideas, it's exciting we're on the move! But those few remaining who remember the way things were said: that's not the way it was when Doctor Solomon was with us. They looked around at the new construction and thought: THIS? THIS IS GOING TO HOUSE THE GLORY OF GOD?!?!

So there was social and political stress, there was community and generational stress. Then there was theological uncertainty, there was the constant question: “What is God doing? Who's in charge around here?”

Even though God's people had been released from exile and returned to their homeland, they were still, in effect, in captivity. Even with these huge expectations going unmet, in their persistent exile, God issues a call to rejoice, a call to worship.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he.

A God commanded Hosanna! Not because we're needing a distraction, not because we believe that God will magically and instantly change our circumstances, poof! But we worship, we rejoice, we fellowship, we pray together so that our focus and our attention in the midst of all of the surrounding chaos will remain firmly fixed on the one who can bring meaning in the midst of chaos, peace to our unrest, compassion to indifference, and joy to heartache. This is why we're commanded to worship—to bring meaning and purpose to confusion.

I wonder when you had a memorable, life altering experience of worship, of exuberance, of overwhelming joy. Among the most memorable times when this happens for me, is not in a church per-se, it's not even really in the context of Christian worship—though I would argue it is both Christian and worship. But I've had these experiences the times when I have attended U2 concerts. Since 2004, when I first saw them at Madison Square Garden—by myself. Everytime I hear that familiar strumming pattern of Where the Streets Have No Name, I feel myself lifted alongside thousands of others—not into the presence of Bono—but into the presence of God. It is as powerful a worship experience as I have ever had, it is how I envision the heavenly experience of worship feeling—not with cliché, mass produced, empty-headed music, and not with doleful, dirgey hymns that feel more like medicine that we have to endure. But with poetry, with lyric, with innovative melodies, and wide-ranging instruments, and throngs and throngs of people all unrestrained in their praise to God. This is the image, this is the longing for worship.

It's what I imagine Zechariah envisioned when he said: **Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and sitting on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**

Then Zechariah goes on to describe how God will transform the tools for battle and the weapons of war that were the tribes of Judah into instruments of praise. Prisoners will be set free, and the Lord will appear over them, trumpets sounding forth, devouring their enemies, saving his people with the strength of his mighty arm. How great is his goodness and how great his beauty!

What a captivating vision. And it wasn't just a vision that was held by Zechariah and the people of his day. It was the hope that was held by the people of Jesus' day as well because they too felt as though they were living in a time of exile. Look with me at the person of John the Baptist, who is the forerunner to Jesus—the last of the Old Testament-like prophets. John was a compelling preacher, a powerful orator, a little strangely dressed and his fad diet wasn't everyone's cup of tea, but John was a powerful witness. And where does it say John's ministry took place. "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea" (Matthew 3:1). The desert...not what the church growth consultants would advise for growing a new church plant: "John it's not what our market research is telling us." But he was doing it to make a point, that God's people, the Israelites were still stuck outside of the Promised Land waiting for the one who would lead them into the Promised Land.

So, when Jesus enters into Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna (literally translated: Save, please.) the people believe that finally, their time has come, their savior has arrived, to lead them into the Promised Land—at least the promised Land of their own imagining, of their perspective. From their perspective it was shedding the weight of foreign oppression, a restoration of Jewish life and worship.

And when we say foreign oppression, we don't just mean that a few Roman Sentries are stationed in Jerusalem, or unjust taxes being imposed, but a real heavy weight of persecution and oppression. A few hundred years earlier the Greek Emperor Antiochus engaged in religious persecution of the Jews, unlike any seen before. He abolished all Jewish festivals, Passover sabbath, circumcision, burned the Torah, forbade temple sacrifice, worst of all set up statue of Olympian god Zeus to be set up in the Jerusalem Temple. The 167 BC ordered a pig—an unclean animal to Jews—to be sacrificed in the temple.

The currency of the day had on the front a picture of Antiochus, and on the back it read “Antiochus, god incarnate bearing victory.” What God's people felt throughout these years of exile—political and spiritual—was the complete loss of control, it was chaos.

How do you deal with this chaos?

- Confront it with revolt
- Accommodate
- Reject, separate
- Seek in the midst of exile the presence of our Savior coming into our lives.

Palm Sunday is the celebration of the King coming into our lives, dealing with the chaos of our lives not by fighting, not by accommodating, not by rejecting and separating, but joining and offering himself. This is Jesus' perspective of Palm Sunday.

You see the exile that filled the hearts of those shouting “Hosanna, save us,” was the exile of political and social dislocation—having Rome on their backs. But the deeper cry, the one which quite possibly is unknown to them at the time, was the cry to save us from our exile from God as a result of sin in our lives. And the way that God enters into this chaos, expressing the depths of his love and devotion to his people in their deepest need, was to experience exile himself—exile on a cross.

Times when you speak more truth than you knowingly realize. People may have just been hailing the coming of a king, because they wanted Rome out of their lives, they wanted their temple and festivals restored, they wanted the worship of Yahweh back at the center. But the deeper truth they were expressing, which they didn't realize, is that Rome really was—not the least of their problems—but it certainly was not their deepest problem. Hosanna, save please, not of the inconvenience of foreign oppressors, but save us from the exile of our very souls, the exile of sin-separation from God. Bring us home, back into the peace and rest of life with you at the center.

In just a few days as Jesus is nailed to the cross and cries out with the words of Psalm 22:1: “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” The words he cried were the deep cries of exile, from a people who are separated from God, longing to come home.

We are facing a moment in history, one that none of us have ever seen before—and hopefully never will again. And right now, we are all crying out “save, please.” We are desperate for intervention, for God to work in the form of some vaccine, or measure that is entirely unknown to us at this time. It is desperate. And I in no way am minimizing or glossing over this desperate need, but when I say perhaps we are being shown an even deeper exile that we are in need of saving.

Are we saying right now, “God save us so that we can return to life as usual?” Preserve our lives and systems of individuality, isolation, consumerism, for our disregard for neighbor, community, environment. Save us so that we can return to our workaholic and our alcoholism. If this is what we are asking, then God please give us a bigger vision. God give us the dreams that you have for your people. Give us the dreams of your heart of a world recreated, where justice, mercy, equity, and humility reign. Give us a vision of nothing less than your Kingdom reign in our midst where the qualities that define our life and our flourishing are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness. Let your love propel us forward as a people, the way love propelled Jesus into this week ahead.

Only love could motivate Jesus to see the freedom he already had as one with the Father, and say: “Let us be for them as well.”

This is the deep Hosanna. This is the longing from the cross of Jesus who said, “forgive them for they know not what they do.” I pray that as we enter into this week of anticipation and preparation for the cross, in the middle of an unprecedented time, that God would enable us to sing out, to cry out for God’s reign, the Kingdom of Christ to become real to us, even here, even now. Would you join me in praying that this would be so?

Let’s pray

Lord Jesus, even in the midst of this time of uncertainty please give us moments throughout our days when we can offer you our whole hearts in prayer and worship. Give us, we pray, a deeper sense of your love and the gravity of the Hosanna’s we sing. Please orient our hearts and minds to your perspective on this world that you love and gave yourself for. This we pray not in our own power, but in the power and grace of Jesus Christ, our sovereign, our savior, our Lord. Amen.