

Sermon for Sunday, March 25, 2018

## **Royal Expectations**

I love to watch award shows, like the Oscars, the Emmys.... Yes, I care about the award ceremony because that generates good conversation about what movies, shows and music are critically acclaimed, but if I'm being honest, I care more about who is wearing what. Everyone knows the best part is the pre-show! What brave gentleman will step out of the typical penguin suit to try his hand at a new designer look? Which woman will win the title of best dressed? Who will tragically earn the title of worst dressed? The runway show leading up to the ceremony is really the biggest show of all.

We have our own red carpet moments too. Big photo opportunities roll around here and there...when we have exciting events to dress in all our glory. These moments present themselves time and again throughout life. When we are little, there are big Sundays at church and family events when we get to premiere our best attire. Think Easter dresses and Christmas suits- and the moments only get bigger. Prom, weddings, balls and galas...these big time events require more than a store bought or catalog ordered specialty. We really pull out all the stops, investing in head to toe looks that put our finest foot forward. These celebrity moments give us something to look forward to, and when they are gone, they give us memories to cherish.

All of the pomp and circumstance in our Gospel text describes an ancient version of what we might consider to be a red carpet moment today. Jesus does not come on foot like his entourage does. He shows up as the special guest who gets a ride. He does not exactly slip into town unnoticed by some back road. He arrives with a crew, and is met by an audience of people. Those people then proceed to lay down cloaks and leaves to arrange a makeshift carpet for him, so as to protect his precious being from the uncleanness of the ground. Although we know in our hearts that Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem is a different kind of celebrity moment, we still can't help but interpret the scene in more familiar ways.

The ancient type scene described for us in the Gospels, and what we celebrate each Palm Sunday, is the peaceful arrival of a king. The processional designates his kingship as the true king of our hearts, our Lord and Savior, who governs us by grace- not by civic authority. But there is something else going on in this text... this is not a coronation scene. There is no crown... and Jesus knows there is only a crown of thorns that awaits him. He is not anointed, as former biblical stories speak of Kings from the house of David being anointed. His ordination, his calling, is to be our Messiah.

Today we read Hosanna's, and we sing Hosanna's... and we do so jubilantly. Often this is thought to mean "praise..." but the Hebrew actually means "save." Strangely, we use Hosanna as a synonym for alleluia...but it isn't. It means something different. It is a joyous expression of praise, but it is specifically pertaining to the joy of salvation.

This little shift in definition changes the way I then read the passage. We are not just shouting out for joy. We are singing Hosanna because we recognize that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a sacrificial act. He is accepting that crown of thorns, and he willingly marches to the cross knowing all the while where it will lead him. He knows he will die. He knows he is not going to any kind of celebration- he is headed for the tomb.

We celebrate nonetheless. We roll out the red carpet anyway, and each year we re-enact that royal treatment in our own way with our palms. We do this because we realize that this kingship is worthy of celebration like none other. For though Jesus marches to his death, he also is ushering in an entirely new kingdom- one with the promise of eternal life. Salvation is coming...but it is not yet here. We still have to wait on the gift of grace to be given; Our King has yet to put on his crown.

Though we know our Prince of Peace will triumph over the grave, in keeping with his gentle grace, he does not ride in on majesty. Most kings would take a horse, but our Jesus signals that he comes in peace by riding on a donkey. In so doing he again highlights how in him we are to expect a new king. A king who does not rule by power and strength, but by gentleness and love. This Prince of Peace is capable of things no human being can

accomplish, and we enter into a new covenant with him acknowledging just that. With our Messiah's saving grace, we can live freely in God's love. We are not bound to sin. With Jesus' new reign, we serve in a kingdom that we can be proud of... we do not boast in Christ's name, but we can be proud that we have a King worthy of our full worship.

So... for his red carpet moment, Jesus does not need a limousine to step out of. He needs a donkey to ride. He does not need a gorgeous date to be his arm candy. He needs his disciples to accompany him. He does not need an award show to attend. He needs a visit to his father's house- the temple. He does not need an after party to celebrate. He needs a calm campsite in Bethany to spend the night with his disciples outside the big city.

Our Lord does not follow the customs- he inverts them. As he does, he signals to us that what we knew before would be turned on its head. The whole world was about to change as our beloved Rabbi humbly processed to Jerusalem... the salvation our loving God promised would come, is finally on its way in Christ- or at least it was for the Israelites.

We are living in the Post-Easter reality. We don't have to wait for salvation because Christ already took up his crown and cross. Where we are situated historically, in our "A.D." time period... we shouldn't have to wait. We already got the gift of grace- its waiting, ready for the taking. Our king has already come, we have already inherited the gift of grace. How are we to relate to the Israelites who waited expectantly for their Messiah?

The reality of salvation in the here and now is an altogether different matter. Our ultimate salvation is sure both in our Post-Easter historical setting and our baptisms... but many of us struggle to see salvation at work in our daily lives. We are not saved from all suffering. We still have to endure hardships, and many of them at that, throughout our entire lives. Which brings me back to expectations.

We have something to learn from those who waited on salvation. We have high expectations of our new king- that he will give us gifts of grace whenever we ask for them. That we will experience miracles at his hand when we feel they are most needed. We set him as our Prince of Peace, and although we know his Lordship rules a different kind of kingdom, we don't remain consistent with our expectations. We place expectations of earthly kings upon our Christian Lord. We expect deliverance on our time frame, and we do not really know how to wait.

Though we may not have to wait for the Messiah to be born like the Israelites once did, we do have to be patient with Jesus. Palm Sunday is more than just a ritual celebration of the coming king. It is an annual opportunity to re-orient ourselves towards Jerusalem, towards the cross... and that is a time consuming process. The way we might normally prepare for a king is not the way prepare our souls for the Messiah. Much like how Jesus' inverted the customs of the royal procession, we are to invert our expectations of our new king.

We can certainly expect Christ to save, but what today's story demonstrates is that will not appear to us in a familiar fashion. Christ's regal reign shifts how things are done and how they look. Shifting expectations of royalty is not a new concept. Think of stories, woven by authors and real life kings and queens alike, where those wearing the crown demonstrate their worthiness of their title. It is not the queen who fears being among the commoners who wins hearts, but it is she who feeds the bellies of those who hunger in her kingdom. It is the king who does not rule his servants with an iron fist, but he who gives his up throne to those who serve him, and he in turn serves them. That is our Lord and Savior. So as we shift our hearts toward Hosanna's, we are not likely to see many red carpets moments. God's salvation is not the royal treatment... but it is quite beautiful in its own way. In a palm and cloak makeshift carpet kind of way.

Royal terms are often used to describe God- our Lord. Not many Sundays compare to Palm Sunday in celebration of Christ's Kingship. I have to admit, almost every year this rolls around, I cannot help but think of Jesus having a celebrity moment. I do not see him as I might see a Cary Grant, a Sean Connery, a Kevin Costner, or a Brad Pitt having a red carpet moment. Those gentlemen are so savvy in their own way, and Jesus is not that cosmopolitan. I see him having more of a Jesus-like

Anastassia C. Sharpe

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA) St. Louis, MO