

Palm Sunday
“Hosanna!” or “Lord, Save Us!”
Mark 11:1-11
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If you're as much of a sports fan as I am, then this past week had to have been a foretaste of heaven for you. Last Monday night, college basketball concluded with the championship game between Kansas and the University of North Carolina as the Jayhawks executed the greatest come-from-behind victory in NCAA championship history. On Thursday, the Masters—Golf's pre-eminent and most popular major—got underway with the winner to be crowned later on this afternoon. Tiger Woods, who after a near-fatal automobile accident fourteen months ago, one so serious that the doctors almost amputated one of his legs, is confounding everyone once again by his ability to rebound from adversity and play as well as he is. And then, for those us who are real baseball fans, who sweated all winter long not knowing whether there'd even BE any games this year due to a player lock-out, the baseball season at last got under way. You'd have to call that a sportsfan's trifecta!

If I was forced to pick my FAVORITE memory from among the innumerable sporting events I have witnessed over the years, near the top of that list would have be the 1969 World Series, when the unheralded New York Mets beat the much-vaunted and heavily-favored Baltimore Orioles in five exciting games. I was a huge Met fan, having gone to Shea Stadium several times that year including the game in which Pittsburgh Pirate hurler Bob Moose no-hit them on September 20, 1969. Only seven years earlier, the Mets had the worst record in baseball history when they won only 40 games while losing 120 and for the rest of that decade, you never saw much improvement. To think they could actually win a league pennant much less a

WORLD SERIES, you would have ALSO had to believe that pigs could fly! Well the improbable DID happen- the New York “Mutts,” our “loveable losers,” were suddenly transformed into the MIRACLE METS and crowned baseball’s World Champions. Afterwards, air traffic controllers at both JFK and LaGuardia airports were reporting that pigs with wings were seen flying past the Empire State Building!

Throughout that year, one of my favorite players was a thirty-six year old utility infielder named Ed Charles, a crowd favorite regarded by many to be the “heart and soul” of that team. As a part-time third baseman who played mainly against left-handers, he only hit .207 but he DID have several crucial hits as the Mets passed the Chicago Cubs in mid-September to win their division, then swept the Atlanta Braves to capture the National League pennant before facing the Orioles in the World Series. When Ed Charles passed away four years ago after a lengthy illness at his home, *The New York Times* posted an in-depth write-up on him. It related how proud he was of that team and of his own contributions that year, but what he was MOST proud of was an event that dramatically changed his life years earlier.

Growing up in Daytona Beach, Florida, he dropped out of school, midway through his teens. But observing his hero--Jackie Robinson--during spring training in 1946, when Robinson was a minor leaguer playing for the Montreal Royals, he was inspired to return to school where he became a football and baseball standout. Several years later, the Dodgers came to St. Petersburg for an exhibition game and he and several friends had a chance to see him again, peering through openings in the outfield fence. After the game, the Dodgers prepared to leave from the railroad station so Ed and his buddies headed down there themselves to get one more glimpse of him. As Charles related the story:

“So now we’re walking down the platform, looking in the windows trying to see where Jackie was seated. Finally we come to the right coach, and there is Jackie, playing cards. We waved and, you know, he waved back to us. Then the train starts pulling out and we start slowly walking with it, just waving to Jackie. The train picked up speed. We kept running and waving till the train got out of sight. Things like that, you know, I can recall so vividly because they were very special moments in my life and in the life of the country. IT WAS LIKE THE MESSIAH HAD COME.”

Did you hear THAT- he said it was as though THE MESSIAH had come! For a young black kid like Ed Charles growing up the segregated South, Jackie Robinson was a powerful symbol of hope that even someone like himself could one day make it in a world dominated by white privilege.

I have to believe that there must have that SAME sense of anticipation and excitement the day a REAL Messiah--a carpenter from Nazareth named JESUS--came marching into Jerusalem. As he drew near to the Holy City, the crowds spread out palms and leaves for him to ride upon and called out to him, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” On the one hand, “hosanna” is a shout of praise, an exclamation of honor generally accorded a conquering hero when he entered a town- a tribute similar to a ticker tape parade down Fifth Ave. in New York City. However, on a DEEPER level, it was a PRAYER FOR HELP, a PLEA FOR RELIEF AND ASSISTANCE. Literally translated, “hosanna” means “save us.” The word is used in Psalm 118:25 where it reads “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!” Thus, more than an exclamation of praise, it reflected their earnest desire for Jesus to come SAVE them, to offer them SOME SHRED OF

HOPE just as Jackie Robinson had offered young African-Americans back in the 40's and 50's. It was a heart-felt cry that they were troubled and in DESPERATE NEED of him.

Now what kind of persons were these who had come out to see and greet him? Only the day before, Jesus had performed THE MIGHTIEST MIRACLE OF ALL- raising his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. News of this feat had spread far and wide in only a few hours time. Then on his way into town, he had healed two blind men so that they were now able to see. Thus, a number of those along the roadway had shown up for curiosity's sake. They had perceived Jesus to be a "great magician," a miracle worker and had to be wondering what amazing deed this Houdini of the Holy Land would perform NEXT.

But ANOTHER group had an even more SERIOUS motivation for being present. These were the Jewish nationalists who were tired of the political repression they had continuously experienced under foreign occupation. The Jews despised the Romans and the Romans, in turn, detested THEM. They were unfairly taxed to pay for Caesar's grand construction schemes and military ambitions. Every move they made was scrutinized and under the watchful eyes of Roman soldiers. Judah had become a corrupt police state filled with spies and secret trials (similar to the one Jesus would soon experience), where people could be arrested on the slightest suspicion and kept imprisoned for as long as the Romans wanted, not much different from what the Russian people are experiencing TODAY. Thus, THIS group of onlookers hoped that Jesus would be their long-awaited Messiah, the Deliverer who would liberate them from all their tyranny and enable them to breathe free once again.

But then there was still ANOTHER group present. THESE persons had little interest in political intrigue for they were more concerned about just being able to survive from one day to

the next. These were the truly desperate- the poor and outcast without access to any form of social services. There was no Medicare or Medicaid programs to help them with their health problems- in fact, there were no doctors or hospitals PERIOD. There were no Social Security checks to assist them with their most basic needs like rent or utility costs, no food stamps to help them alleviate their hunger pains. Work was scarce, and if one didn't have a trade or specialty to perform, then he or she was often reduced to begging. Such persons had little more than HOPE to live on- a hope that one day their condition might improve, a hope that God would take pity on them and send someone their way to help ease their miserable existence. They didn't know much about this Jesus other than by reputation, but what they DID know was enough to inspire them to line the streets and welcome him as their possible savior.

For Jesus, the temptation to alleviate the hunger and sufferings of his people, to become a political savior or social reformer must have been GREAT INDEED. Had he fed their STOMACHS instead of their souls, the road before him would have been an easy one. Jesus would have been a NATIONAL HERO instead of a deluded rabbi; his fate would have been a MONARCH'S THRONE rather than a criminal's cross. Since the days of King David, the Jews had desperately LONGED for just such a person- a SOCIAL/POLITICAL MESSIAH whose kingdom WAS of this world.

St. Chrysostom, an early Church Father, wrote, "It is not so much sin which plunges us into calamity but rather despair." Hopelessness, despair- this is the great sin of our or ANY age, and the convenient answer is to resort to some military or political, some social or economic solution to end all our problems and restore our peace. In the early part of the last century, there was a leader of a modern nation who presented himself as a paragon of virtue. An intensely moral man, he was

a vegetarian who did not smoke, drink, or carry on with women. He exemplified in his life thrift, industry, honesty, courage, love of family and country. He honored motherhood and was constantly pictured as a lover of little children and flowers. He posed as a patron of the arts, a lover of painting, classical music, and architecture. He represented himself as a religious man who frequently spoke of duty to God and was often photographed with prominent religious leaders. He was a strong anti-communist.

Before he came to power, there were six million unemployed in his country; there was violence in the streets and constant clashes between political parties. He promised to restore law and order and end unemployment, which in a few short years he miraculously accomplished. Even in foreign affairs, he appeared as a champion of world peace. He denounced imperialism in any form and eloquently argued that all countries should enjoy equal legal status in the community of nations, that all conflicts should be settled through peaceful negotiations.

Thus this leader, greatly beloved by his people, respected as a statesman by other world leaders, who appeared as a religious man, an impeccably moral man, a true patriot who restored prosperity and self-respect for his nation- this man was none other than...Adolf Hitler. He offered his people peace and prosperity, but it was based on guile and fear, on treachery and deception. He appealed to his country's lowest and deepest passions and they responded with complete loyalty and unqualified trust and total obedience. Even many church leaders believed they saw the hand of God upon the renewal of the German people and Adolf Hitler as their leader.

But "Hitler" is now a byword for infamy; he was one of the GREAT MONSTERS of all time- a man responsible for the murder of six million Jews and the architect for a World War in which twenty million enlisted men were killed or missing in action, a million civilians died,

millions more wounded, and still millions more left as refugees. He came as a Messiah to give life to his nation but he wound up leaving it in ruins.

Now Jesus was acutely aware of what it was his people wanted, but what they needed and what he OFFERED them was something ENTIRELY different. Hunger is certainly one of the greatest realities we as humans have to contend with, and if you want to know what its connection to the human spirit is, then try praying on an empty stomach- it becomes almost impossible. Jesus was by no means an ascetic. He was so concerned about physical needs that when his followers became hungry, he multiplied loaves and fish to feed over five thousand of them.

But what Jesus came to teach us is that MORE IMPORTANT than the social and economic and physical necessities of life are its SPIRITUAL requirements. Of THIS food, Jesus said whosoever came to him would never hunger, and whosoever believed in him would never thirst. He clearly understood that all the world's goods were ULTIMATELY INCAPABLE of satisfying us as his encounter with the rich, young ruler showed. The young man had approached Jesus because in spite of all his power and money and influence, there was still something FAR GREATER he lacked. We have only to look around to see it with our OWN eyes. With all our material abundance, Americans have never been MORE hungry in their lives, that as our standard of living has risen, so has our boredom and loneliness and weariness of life. Recent studies have revealed that the number of Americans treated for depression has quadrupled and the proportion of those receiving antidepressants has doubled JUST IN THE PAST TEN YEARS.

For over a decade, I lived in the San Francisco Bay area- one of the most beautiful and wealthy areas in the entire country. It was SO affluent that I used to tell people that Marin County--where I went to seminary--consisted of two classes of people- there were the RICH who owned Rolls Royces and Bentleys, and then there were the POOR who drove around in Mercedes Benzes. And yet as beautiful as it was, as secure as those people were both materially and financially, they were besieged by rampant loneliness, anxiety, and spiritual emptiness. It was rare to find someone who had not been married at least two or three times. Latchkey kids were the norms. *US News & World Report* at one time called it the "cocaine capitol of the world" and went on to describe how the drug had become the major currency of Silicon Valley. Many are drawn to spiritual counterfeits bearing the acronyms EST and TM to fill their void, or seduced by various New Age religions which demand no obedience and sacrifice from them, religions which tell them they're good and affirm their lifestyles. They come seeking "peace of mind" when what they REALLY need is "peace with God." Yet despite all their status and material abundance, many remain miserable inside, with alcoholism and suicide rates running much higher than the national average. There is a hunger which all their affluence simply can't alleviate.

Well Jesus saw there was a danger to social improvement without spiritual re-birth. He knew that we could not live without bread, but he also knew that we could not live by bread ALONE. He knew we must ALSO LIVE BY FAITH, for only with faith do we live in constant relationship with God- with One who will never leave or forsake us, with One who promises to meet our need according to his riches in heaven. He knew we must LIVE BY HOPE, for only hope can raise our sights above the mundane affairs of this world to behold that peaceable

kingdom where one day war and death and sickness and even temptation will be no more. He knew we must LIVE BY LOVE, for only when we belong to someone else, when we unconditionally give ourselves over to another person, can we then transcend all the fear and loneliness and hate in ourselves and in the other. He knew we must LIVE BY TRUTH, for only truth can courageously address the inequities and injustices of a system that is always protected by persons in power. He knew we must ALSO LIVE BY JUSTICE and by BEAUTY, by WORSHIP and by PRAYER.

Like those spectators who lined the streets to Jerusalem, we TOO find ourselves on that same roadway this very morning. Like them, our cry ALSO goes up, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” or “Lord SAVE us! Jesus, DELIVER us from all our troubles!” Every one of us has deep and pressing needs, and we believe that if we could just catch his attention, if we can only capture his ear, something good just might happen for US. Well I warn you. Don’t be TOO disappointed if after all your pleading and all your shouting and all your praying, your stock investments suddenly go south or your health takes a turn for the WORSE, a son or daughter goes to JAIL or the company you work for must close. The fact is that Christ is not some kind of personal genie responsive to our every whim; he’s not there to solve all our problems and do all our bidding. The devil’s strategy has always been to get people to believe that God exists for THEM, to convince people that God is there to satisfy THEIR wants and THEIR needs and not the other way around.

Rather, Christ is there to offer us something MORE PRECIOUS than much fine gold- he offers us HIMSELF, he extends to us his PERSONAL PRESENCE. He never tires of reminding us of his great LOVE for us, of repeating the PROMISE that he will bear us up when life gets too

harsh, that he will dry our tears when the sorrow becomes way too heavy, and he will calm our fears when all our supports have been yanked out from beneath us. He tells us that in his own way and own time, we WILL be cared for- of that we can be certain. The MAIN thing is that we stay close and hold on to him tightly, that we trust in him and rely in his word, for if we do, we are assured we will then NEVER NEED ANOTHER SAVIOR- EVER! Amen and amen.