

“Wandering Heart: #6 - Songs of Loudest Praise?”

Riverside United Church

March 24, 2024

Scripture Lesson: John 12: 12-16 - Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!’

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!’

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“Wandering Heart: #6 - Songs of Loudest Praise?”

If you were part of the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem, do you imagine singing or shouting Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.? And if so, how loudly would you be singing or shouting? Or, do you think you would be on the sideline, observing and wondering what on earth is going on?

At the beginning of the service we sang, Hosanna **Loud** Hosanna.

Today, our theme from A Wandering Heart resource comes from the lyrics of the hymn Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing and we are reminded of the line - “streams of mercy never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise.”

As I live into this Holy Week, I am wondering if loud and loudest is the volume level that is appropriate this year?

When Jesus entered into Jerusalem, he was entering amidst a tense time of political and religious unrest. Marcus Borg - a biblical scholar - speaks of Jesus’ parade into Jerusalem being one of two parades that may have entered Jerusalem in the days leading up to the Passover celebration. From the east, there was a peasant parade of Jesus entering on a donkey. From the west, there would have been a parade of imperial cavalry and soldiers leading the way for the entrance of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who wanted to show the power of the empire. Jesus came in to proclaim the kingdom of God. These two processions with their distinct differences embody the central conflict of the week that leads to Jesus’ death.

And it may be a good thing that the parades entered in different places, because we can imagine that if they crossed then there would have been a lot of shouting at one another - or worse.

That context of political and religious unrest is one of the places where this story seems more poignant this year. We are living in a time where there seems to be a lot of unrest; there seems to be a level of

hostility simmering pretty close to the surface due to a variety of factors and variables. We live in a time of polarization of ideas and partisanship. We have seen protest and counter-protests trying to out shout one another. There are economic factors that raise anxiety. There seems to be an erosion of democratic principles and commitment. And there are wars being fought in other places in the world, but whose pain touches close to home within circles of connection and concern. There is a lot of lament needing to be expressed.

On Wednesday night, Elizabeth and I attended the annual Community Iftar at the Mosque of Mercy. This is the Holy month of Ramadan and an iftar is the breaking of fast meal after sundown each day. We had been at the Community Iftar event 5 years ago, but this one was different. The community leaders that came were health care leaders, school board officials, a diplomat, a few other faith and social service representatives. The difference was the political climate regarding the war in Gaza and Israel which made it difficult for some other categories of community leadership to attend. The sense of celebration in being together was muted somewhat by the unrest with which we live.

Through this Lenten season, we have been exploring the experiences of Peter as he grows into the role of being a follower and disciple of Jesus. It has been a bumpy path of learning and understanding. The resource we are using is called: A Wandering Heart. In our reading today, Peter is not mentioned by name, but we imagine that he is present because there is reference to the disciples being with Jesus. As Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, and as a crowd waved palms and sang - shouted Hosanna, there were probably a lot of different understandings and hopes that were being expressed.

The author of the gospel of John has the briefest account of this procession and spends a bit more time on sharing the mindset of the disciples. *"His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."*

So if we are feeling a little been confused, distressed, anxious about this story of Jesus' final week, then we may not be only ones. The disciples did not understand these things at first ... It was only after Jesus was glorified that they remembered and the pieces came together to offer meaning.

We may imagine that some of the disciples were still believing, still hoping that Jesus would lead the revolt against Rome. Even though Jesus was clear that those expectations of the Messiah were not who he was, I imagine that there was still hope amongst the disciples and the crowd shouting Hosanna that the act of saving would be one of political might and confrontation. It was only afterwards and in hindsight that maybe they came understand that Jesus had a different understanding and embodiment of power.

As this Holy week begins, we do have the advantage of knowing the story of the whole week. And yet I imagine that we still live with various questions about its meaning. As this Holy week begins, we do not understand all that is happening in our world and how the Holy will be at work in world.

As we live in our present reality, we may wonder about songs of loudest praise. But, it may prompt us to ponder what songs do we need to be singing, living. How can the clash and contrast of parades, of priorities, of polarities, find a way to listen to one another - instead of shouting at one another.

In the biblical story, the two featured characters in the contrasting parades did meet. Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate and there was a huge power differential at play in the drama of that scene. But, Pontius Pilate in talking with Jesus recognizes a power that he does not possess and Pilate is left unsettled; he was hesitant to do what everyone expected him to do. Yet, he ends up washing his hands of responsibility instead of having the courage to challenge those who are threatened by Jesus' truth and inner power.

It may be difficult to find ourselves in this Holy Week story in any one of the characters, because there is part of us in many of the characters and scenes in this story. That is why it is such an important story, an eternal story. It is only when we know the end, that we can call it a holy story, but even then there are many disguises of evil, many glimpses of truth mixed together. Maybe it is only in hindsight and reflection, that we remember and can find some meaning amidst the unrest.

So, as we enter this week, what songs will be in our souls, in our lives? What theme will resonate, what truth is needed? We need some bridges over troubled waters. We need there to be peace on earth and how does that begin with me. We shall overcome some day and meanwhile we find the courage to not be afraid today. We need Hosanna to be offered in prayer and action as we need God to save us, to strengthen us.

As we live into this Holy Week, I pray that the volume button of our worlds shouting can be turned down so that listening, meaning and peace can be known.

I did notice that in Voices United, in the lyrics to Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing that the phrase "songs of loudest praise has been changed to "songs of endless praise." I like that change because faithfulness - through challenging times of unrest - is not about being the loudest, but is a call and challenge to live an endurance of trust and hope. So, above earth's lamentation we are invited to endless praise as we connect to the Holy. We cannot keep from singing God's song of truth, love and hope especially when we do not understand all that is happening.

So, let us keep God's song alive, and as we live may we continue to remember and respond. Amen.