

WHEN WILT THOU SAVE THE PEOPLE?
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Text: John 12:12-16

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.

When wilt thou save the people? O God of mercy, when?" Famous words, but not from the gospels. They're from Godspell.

Today is Palm Sunday, and more than any other day of the year, this is the one that's tailor made for a musical. It's big, it's flashy, and everyone gets a prop. Behind the scenes, though, Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem is a very complicated event. There's a lot going on here in the background. People are fed up with the way things are under the Romans, and they desperately want change, and they're thinking maybe, just maybe, this controversial young rabbi they've been hearing so much about is the one who can provide it.

So what we see in this reading is really more like a protest than a parade. And if you look at it from the point of view of the authorities, it's really more like a riot—a mob of people moving through the streets of the capital shouting, "Hosanna!" which is a plea for divine deliverance. It literally means, "Lord, save us!"

Let's take a step back and see how we got here.

This morning we find ourselves in John's gospel, chapter twelve, right after Mary anoints Jesus and a group of religious leaders starts plotting to kill him. So a lot has already happened, but the real conflict is yet to come.

Collectively, the first twelve chapters of John are known as the "Book of Signs" because this is where Jesus performs miracles and presents teachings that point to the deeper reality of who he is and what he came to do. And it all culminates with his most astounding miracle of all: the raising of Lazarus. When he comes stumbling out of the tomb, still wrapped in burial cloths, everything changes. From that point on, Jesus is officially causing too much of a stir and raising too many hopes, and the powers-that-be are taking notice. What was a minor nuisance is now looking like a real problem. What was a small movement with a handful of followers is now looking like a genuine threat. And what we see this morning is the moment

when that threat comes knocking on the door.

So all eyes are fixed on Jesus as he enters the gates of the city. The authorities are looking at him and asking themselves, “What are we going to do about this guy? How are we going to keep this from boiling over?” The people in the crowds are looking at him and asking themselves, “Could this guy be the one? Could he be the one we’ve been waiting for—the one who’s finally going to get the Romans off our backs and restore Israel to its former glory?”

And then there’s us. We don’t care about ancient politics, but we have our own questions—questions about the things we’re dealing with in our own lives, whether it’s a health crisis or family issues or money problems. Whatever it is we’re facing, whatever it is that’s keeping us up at night, whatever it is that’s weighing on us, we want to know if Jesus can help us get through it. And it may not even be anything we can put our finger on. Maybe we’re just having one of those moments when we’re feeling down or frustrated or overwhelmed, and we just want to know if Jesus can get us through the day. Can he give us the strength, the patience, the serenity to hang on until things get better?

“When wilt thou save the people? O God of mercy, when?”

So my question is, how do we know if Jesus really can do all these things we want him to do? How do we know if he really can provide whatever kind of saving we need? I think there’s a clue at the end of the reading.

The crowds are waiting for Jesus, and he’s off somewhere getting ready to make his entrance. He finds a young donkey and sits down on it, evoking a line from the prophet Zechariah: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” Meanwhile, the disciples are standing around, watching all this, and they have no idea what it means. Why are all these

people so excited? And why is Jesus riding around on a donkey? And not even a grown-up donkey, but a baby donkey? They don’t understand that everything that’s happening is a sign. It’s all pointing to the deeper reality of who Jesus is and what he came to do. It won’t be until later on that they finally see the big picture. It won’t be until after Jesus is raised from the dead that they look back on this moment and go, “Oh! Now we get it!”

So we have a big advantage over the disciples in this reading. We already know how the story ends. We already know who Jesus is and what he came to do. We already know when wilt thou save the people, O God of mercy. Perhaps we’ve even experienced it in our lives. Perhaps we’ve experienced the power of resurrection—the power of God to bring life out of death; the power of God to bring hope out of despair; the power of God to make a way where there is no way.

It was just a few years ago that I was completely burned out and didn’t want anything to do with ministry anymore. I left the church I was serving, and I started doing something else. I was done with being a pastor. I preached my last sermon, hung up my robe, and closed that door for good. But then somehow God opened it up again, and here I am today, not only serving another church, but actually enjoying it and feeling fulfilled by it—something I wouldn’t have thought was possible just a short time ago.

So today, if you’re looking at Jesus riding along on the back of that donkey and you’re asking yourself if he can get you through whatever it is you’re facing, I think the place to look for the answer is in your own life. When has a door been opened up for you that you thought was closed forever? When have you come through the darkness and discovered light on the other side? When

has the end of the road turned out to be a new beginning?

When wilt thou save the people, O God of mercy? I think the answer is all the time. And as we head into Holy Week, I invite you to do a little reflecting on that. Look back at your own experiences and try to see where God was in those moments. Try to see how God was loving and guiding and caring for you when you needed it the most. Amen.