

“Hungry for a Hero”

John 12:12-16

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Occasionally you hear a pessimist lament, “There are no heroes today.” I don’t think that’s true. To be sure, the media delights in uncovering evidence that society’s heroes have feet of clay, but heroes may still be found if you’re willing to look. But what should you be looking for? What are the traits of a hero? On this question people are divided. They were divided in Jesus’ day, too, as the story of Palm Sunday reveals.

Passover was one of the three pilgrimage festivals of ancient Judaism, the others being Pentecost and Tabernacles. Males living within twenty miles of Jerusalem were required to attend, but Jewish men, women, and children came from all over the Roman world to participate in Passover, the greatest of the religious festivals. Each year Jerusalem and its suburbs swelled to the bursting point with joyous pilgrims. Jesus could not have chosen a more strategic time of the year for his dramatic entry, for the city literally overflowed with pilgrims fired up with religious expectations.

Shortly before that fateful Passover, a rumor began to circulate in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, that Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. As you can imagine, the news caused quite a stir! Could this Jesus of Nazareth be the long-awaited Messiah? Fearful that the messianic fever sparked by the report might come to the attention of the Romans, some of the religious leaders ordered that Jesus be arrested on sight. When Jesus learned of this, he and his disciples escaped to the village of Ephraim about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem. Although Jesus had dropped out of sight, all Jerusalem was abuzz: “What do you think?” the pilgrims asked one another. “Surely he won’t come to the festival . . . will he?”

Six days before Passover, Jesus returned to Bethany where Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, gave a dinner in his honor. When the people of Bethany learned that he was there, a crowd assembled to see him.

The next morning many of the pilgrims who had gathered in Jerusalem for Passover heard that Jesus was indeed coming, so they flooded out of the city to meet him, a vast throng waving palm branches and singing, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

The manner in which the people greeted Jesus is illuminating. Their words are from Psalm 118, the last in a group of six psalms known as the *Hallel*, a Hebrew word meaning “Praise God!” Sung at all the great festivals, these psalms were some of the first passages of scripture a Jewish child memorized. Psalm 118 had special importance for it was viewed as the conqueror’s psalm, praising God for the military victory of the Jewish king over a foreign enemy. For almost six centuries, however, the psalm had mainly been sung in anticipation, for

with the exception of the brief period of independence under the Maccabees, the Jewish people had been subjected to a succession of foreign powers: first the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Thus, the psalm was sung in anticipation of a coming Messiah who would deliver the people.

As commonly understood at the time, the Messiah would be a militant conqueror who would cast off the yoke of foreign oppression and reestablish the throne of his ancestor, King David. Israel would again be an independent state, and Jerusalem would be the focal point of the world, a light to the nations drawing people to the knowledge and worship of God. In singing this psalm, the crowd proclaimed Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, the one who had come to fulfill their militant, nationalistic expectations.

How could Jesus explain to the crowd that they had the wrong idea of the Messiah's role? His *voice* could not be heard above the cacophony, so he *did* something that everyone could see. Amid the surging mass of people, Jesus came riding a donkey.

We should note two things about his mode of entry. First, it was a deliberate claim to be the Messiah. In dramatic fashion, Jesus enacted the words of the prophet Zechariah: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; *triumphant* and *victorious* is he, *humble* and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9). By his action, Jesus accepted the crowd's acclamation of him as God's Messiah, but we should note carefully that he did more than merely accept it.

The second thing we should note about his mode of entry is that it portrayed his understanding of messiahship. In the ancient world, a king came riding a horse if he was bent on war; when he came in peace, he rode a donkey. By this action, Jesus proclaimed that he was not the warrior figure desired by the crowd; rather, he was the Prince of Peace. Unfortunately, the crowd's nationalistic expectations blinded them to the symbolism. Even Jesus' disciples were swept up in the excitement. As the Gospel of John candidly states, only after they had experienced Good Friday and Easter did the disciples come to understand Jesus' dramatic symbolic action on Palm Sunday.

We should not be too hard on the crowd and the disciples, however. They had been oppressed for so many years that they longed for a glimpse of greatness. They were starving for the spectacular. They were hungry for a hero. So certain were they of *how* God *must* act, their expectations kept them from perceiving *when* God *did* act. As worshipers of brute physical force rather than the power of divine love, they looked for a Militant Monarch, a Conquering King—and their expectations blinded them so that they could not see the coming of the Prince of Peace.

No, we should not be too hard on the crowd and the disciples, for things have not changed all that much despite the passing of almost two thousand Palm Sundays—a sad indictment of the Church's failure to perceive and proclaim the message at the heart of Jesus' life and teachings. But then, *every* culture has indulged in the worship of brute force. The

Scandinavians had their mighty Vikings; the English, their Knights of the Round Table; the Japanese, their Samurai. Today most history courses are *still* taught using military campaigns as the organizing principle; television extols violence as the solution to every problem; and politicians argue over who will be the toughest on terrorism and crime. No, things have not changed all that much despite 2000 years of church history. Our culture *still* looks for the wrong kind of hero and overlooks the true heroes in our midst.

O that contemporary disciples of Jesus would hear the message of Palm Sunday! O that they would commit themselves to work for peace through justice! O that they would widen their narrow, nationalistic perspective and adopt God's global vision! O that today's Christians would be courageous enough to be at odds with the dominant culture that worships brute force! O that we might hunger for the *right kind* of hero!

And that's today's good news.