

## **“Claiming the Blood”**

*Reading: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Zechariah 9:9-13, 16; Matthew 21:1-11*

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*Almost* can be a tragic word. *Almost* is the word you use when you're close, so close, but you're just not quite there. It's the word you use when things just about worked out the way you planned but then didn't quite pull together in the end. It's the word you use when you had such high hopes and you thought you could do it, but then something happened, and then you've got some explaining to do. So close, but not quite there. Some examples of what I mean: “I almost spelled it right.” “I could almost reach it.” “I almost got away with it.” “I almost had that gorgeous trophy buck.”

*Almost* can be a tragic word. “I almost passed that test.” “We almost worked things out in our marriage.” “We were almost able to save him.” It's a word that can speak of having hope that things are going to be okay, but then having that hope taken away from you by the harshness of reality. It's a word that can mean that you were surprised by how things turned out, but you weren't surprised in a good way.

Today is the day when we celebrate Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, and as we read the gospel passage that tells the story of the first Palm Sunday, I can't help thinking that so many of the people there on that Palm Sunday were Almost People – they weren't almost people in the sense that they weren't quite human, no, they were Almost People because their responses to Jesus that day and the days that followed were characterized by “almost.” They almost had it right, they almost had the eyes to see what was happening right before them, they almost responded to Jesus as they should have, but then just a few short days later, those same Almost People who had started out so close to where they should have been ended up straying so far. And so Palm Sunday is an awkward sort of holiday, I think. It's a bittersweet celebration, because we break out our palm branches and sing and celebrate a day that leads inevitably toward Good Friday, where the shouts of “Hosanna in the highest!” give way to jeers and taunts of “Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God!” We celebrate the arrival of our salvation, but we're not ready for the kingdom reality that our salvation comes through the blood of Christ.

But let's back up. What's all this business about waving palms, anyway, and what on earth does “hosanna” mean? If the story of Jesus' life told in the gospels was an action movie, Palm Sunday would be the beginning of that final, exciting climax that the rest of the movie had been building up to. If this was a football game, Palm Sunday would be the moment thirty seconds from the end of the game when the local heroes intercept the ball and begin their eighty yard run for the touchdown that will win the game. The crowds are standing up and cheering, because this is the beginning of something that everyone has been waiting for. The gospels all tell a long story leading up to the point when Jesus enters Jerusalem and is crucified, and Palm Sunday is the part of the story where everything begins moving unstoppably toward that end. No more setting things up. No more waiting or holding back. This is it.

Jesus had spent several years out in the country doing what he did: teaching the people about the kingdom of God, healing the sick and broken, challenging the self-righteous and the power hungry, taking an already unstable society and threatening to flip it on its head, doing the sorts of things that will get you noticed by the powers-that-be. And then Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, the seat of

those powers-that-be, and it doesn't take a lot of imagination to realize that he's setting himself up for a confrontation. It's one thing to publicly proclaim all sorts of inflammatory things and build up a following out in the middle of rural Kansas, but if you start saying and doing the same sorts of things while walking up the steps of Capitol Hill in Washington, someone's likely to think it's high time they put a stop to you. Palm Sunday is that day when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem. Everyone's been watching him, waiting to see what he's going to do; now is when they expect something big to happen.

The crowds are looking for a Messiah; they are being oppressed and are looking for someone sent from and anointed by God to be their savior. They want the foreign oppressors out, they want a glorious nation reborn, they want the bad guys to suffer, they want the rich and the powerful to be forced to give them justice and freedom and prosperity, they want all those things that crowds usually want. And they think – they hope, at least – that Jesus is the one to give it to them. After all, God had promised them someone like Jesus, and they had been waiting hundreds of years for those promises to be fulfilled. Zechariah's prophecy is only one of the places in the Old Testament where God promised his people that he had not forgotten them, he would not abandon them forever, he would not let their enemies go unpunished, there would come a day when the Lord would restore his people to peace and power and glory, and he would send them a king, a king as great as king David had been, to bring in this glorious new age. Jesus was already a celebrity out in the country, drawing huge crowds from miles around to hear his teaching and see his miracles; he seemed as good a candidate as any to bring about the triumphant Day of the Lord. And now they see the great celebrity riding into the capital city; maybe he's here to throw out the thugs and scoundrels in power. And then someone mutters to his neighbor, "Is he riding a donkey? Wasn't there some prophecy about someone riding a donkey?" And then they're all shouting "Hosanna!" to him, which means, "Please, save us!" They're shouting to him as though he were a mighty king come to deliver them, and as Matthew tells us in his gospel, the whole city was stirred as though it had been shaken by an earthquake.

Almost. They almost had the eyes to see what God was doing right in front of them. They almost had the right response to what was happening.

You see, if Jesus really was who he claimed he was, if he really was the one sent from God, if he really was in fact God himself, the Word Made Flesh, and if those very old stories were true, the ones that talked about how we as humans had rejected God and tried to take his place, then that means that Jesus deserved every "Hosanna!" they shouted at him on that first Palm Sunday. This was God, faithful to his creation, faithful to his people, returned to us in spite of the fact that we had already rejected his love, coming to claim his rightful place as our God who loves us and wants to enjoy his creation with us. He had every right to every throne and crown and scepter and government in the world, he had every right to the acclaim and praise of all the crowds of the many nations, and he had every right to banish forever every sickness and demon and darkness and war. He deserved to ride into Jerusalem as a glorious king, because that's what he was.

But these were Almost People who were cheering him: they almost had the eyes to see, but not quite. They almost understood what he was there to do. They were almost willing to commit themselves to becoming a part of that kingdom that he had been talking about. Almost, but not quite. They didn't quite have the eyes to see what that kingdom really meant. They didn't quite understand what sort of king Jesus really was. They did the same things we do: schoolchildren don't say they want

to spend their lives serving lepers in a slum, they say they want to grow up to be a professional hip hop star. Our heroes are professional athletes, not the guy working at the soup kitchen downtown. Nobody wants a king who dies without even putting up a fight, without even defending himself, but everybody wants a dashing revolutionary hero, overcoming insurmountable odds to send the mightiest armies of the world running with their tails between their legs. Nobody wants a king who says that in his kingdom, the first are last and the last are first, that you have to deny yourself if you want to be a part of that kingdom, that the poor and mourning are blessed; we want kings and governments that will make us rich and happy and comfortable and safe. Nobody wants a king who expects us to love our enemies and pray for the people who persecute us; we want our governments to hunt and kill the bad guys using every means necessary, including torture if that's what it takes. Nobody wants a king who tells us to take care of the immigrants and strangers and homeless; we want our government to secure our borders and clear our streets of the riffraff. Nobody wants a king who says that you should sell all you have and give the money to the poor; we want our government to take any measures possible to make sure our economy is growing.

In other words, nobody wants a savior who saves by his own blood, and then calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. We've spent this season of Lent exploring the meaning of the atonement, and trying to understand how the blood of Christ makes us right with God. What we haven't spent as much time on is how difficult it is to claim that blood for ourselves, and to accept that this is what salvation looks like.

Things haven't changed. Those Almost People cheering Jesus on Palm Sunday, crying out to him to save them as their great king, had the same priorities many of us have. Many of them were almost willing to commit to Jesus' kingdom – almost, as long as that kingdom came with the power and the glory and the wealth and the national security that they wanted. Many of them were almost willing to commit to Jesus' way of doing things – almost, as long as it didn't interfere with their daily lives and validated their lifestyles. Many of them were almost willing to acclaim Jesus as their king – almost, as long as he did things their way. We know they were Almost People because not long after Palm Sunday, those same crowds were shouting for Jesus to be executed, and those same crowds mocked him while he was dying. They were every bit as fickle and uncommitted as we can so often be.

The problem with that is that there's nothing *almost* about the kingdom of God. It's not the sort of kingdom where you can take certain parts and leave others. It's not the sort of kingdom whose king is content with having almost all your allegiance. He's not the sort of king who wants your commitment to him almost all the time. It's the sort of kingdom that wants you to come with the same trust and faith that a little child has in her good father; it doesn't value powerful warriors or great diplomats. It's the sort of kingdom that calls for complete commitment, consecration of everything you have and everything you are to the service and the love of the God who has given himself for you. You can't love almost all your neighbors if you're going to be a part of Christ's kingdom; he calls you to love every one of them, no matter how messy or difficult or annoying or spiteful they are. You can't offer him almost all your time or money or resources; all things are for the glory of God and his service.

There's nothing *almost* about the kingdom of God. Jesus didn't almost go to Jerusalem where he knew he would face death. He didn't almost commit himself to obeying the will of his Father. He didn't almost offer himself as a sacrifice atoning for our sins. The kingdom of God isn't an Almost

Kingdom, it's an Already Kingdom. It's already here, it's already among us, it's already working and moving and changing the very world around us. The work to reconcile us to God has already been done, the Holy Spirit has already been poured out, God has already offered himself to make us new, he has already begun the work of new creation.

And so those crowds of Almost People on Palm Sunday are there, cheering for Jesus the celebrity, Jesus the rock star, Jesus the mighty warrior, Jesus the professional athlete, Jesus the wise philosopher. And then those same crowds will cheer for his execution when he turns out not to be what they were expecting, when he ends up demanding more than they'd like to give. The thing about Palm Sunday is that it's followed by Good Friday. The Hosannas are followed by the cross. If you cheer for Jesus on Palm Sunday because he's exciting, popular, wise, interesting, moving, but then you stop short of the cross on Good Friday because it's too hard, demanding, time-consuming, expensive, then you're an Almost Person. Do you have the eyes to see the work God is doing? Are you living in the kingdom of God that is already here? Are you joining in that work? Our Lord and our God has done a new thing, his kingdom is already here, he has already done all that needs to be done for us to be reconciled with him and with one another, and he is calling all of us to follow him with all that we are. What about you? *Almost* can be a tragic word.



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