

"Comes a Horseman"
Sermon for Palm/Passion Sunday
Lectionary Year A
March 16, 2008
Text: Matthew 21:1-11
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They were blind that day, all that wide-eyed throng shouting "Hosannas," waving their palm branches, and jockeying for a better view of the one they had not eyes to see. Comes a horseman, or so they thought they could make out on the horizon. It was a blind multitude, made up of pilgrims who had come for the festival in Jerusalem mingled with many, many disciples—*too* many. If they had not been blind, there would have not been so many, if any at all. But fired with enthusiasm, blind enthusiasm, they stripped off their outer garments and made a carpet over which their conqueror should ride.

But they were blind, all of them—those who surrounded him and made up the slow procession and those who ran out from Jerusalem to meet him and then turned to precede him into the holy city. So blind were they that they could not see that the chariot and the prancing steed were really diminutive and uncertain beasts of burden. So blind were they that they could not see the conspicuously absent helmet and shield and banner or that there was no sword stained with the blood of their enemies.

So blind were they that they had no idea how quickly their "Hosannas" would turn in mid-air into their opposites, so that by the end of the week they would be crying, "Crucify him!" So blind were they that

they could not see nor could they even have imagined there were tears in the eyes of their king as he looked from the Mount of Olives across to the holy city and her children. On that first Palm Sunday, everybody was so blind they could not see him at all.

But they passed the word: "Comes a horseman. Tell Jerusalem her king is arriving." Jerusalem got the message and turned her proud head to the Mount of Olives, but she did not see him. Their eyes met; he saw her, but she did not see him. Jerusalem the golden saw instead what she had prepared for so long to see—she, whose heart ached with the recollection of splendor and the sweet memories of King David and King Solomon; she, whose mind could not accept the humiliation of Roman occupation, but went to sleep at night on dreams of restored glory and awoke every morning to the thought that this just might be the day; she, like a forgotten mistress of God, watching the hills for the message from her lover who would come and place the long-awaited crown on her queenly head.

Jerusalem the golden, the daughter of Zion, what a beauty she had been. But too many years of infatuation with herself and flirtation with too many others had left only the memory of her lover's name, and she had become blind to his face. And so Jesus wept as Jerusalem stared at him with a longing smile, but with unseeing eyes. So you see, it was a "triumphal entry" only because the city was the blind capitol of a blind world. The one man who had eyes saw only that he was not seen. Passing face after face after face, he saw real smiles, real voices, real "Hosannas," but stones for eyes.

Later, some saw him, it is true. Annas, the high priest; scribes;

Pharisees; Pontius Pilate—all caught enough of a glimpse to know that they did not wish to see more. How ironic, that "his enemies understood" [Marney]. Gradually everyone began to catch on. Fickle Jerusalem whispered to everyone within earshot that this was not her champion after all, that she had decided to wait a while longer. Maybe the next horseman that comes will be him. Or the next. Or the next. Or the next. And she is waiting still.

One-eyed disciples, beginning to see of what stoness this kingdom really was made, hid in the dark and closed their one good eye, all except one who remained in the open, insisting that he could see, until a rooster crowing at dawn brought tears to his eyes, and one other who plucked out his eyes for thirty pieces of silver and then could not buy them back at any price. And the blindness of that first Palm Sunday has become contagious, almost congenital, almost genetic, and has been passed down ever since. We have heard so much about the one who rode into Jerusalem that day that we, too, cannot really see him, or feel him, or accept him [adapted from David Matthews' sermon, "What Love Did for You," preached March 24, 1991, Good Samaritan Church, Orlando, FL.].

Yes they were blind that first Palm Sunday, but our vision hasn't improved much, if any at all. Why are we still so sightless to the servant king, the one who ushers in his reign and rule through suffering death? Why do our eyes remain glazed over, after all that we know about him? Why do we keep looking for another horseman to come riding into our lives to be our saving grace?

Because the same things that blinded the eyes of the multitude waving their palm branches blind ours today. Power blinds our eyes.

Hatred blinds our eyes. Suspicion blinds our eyes. Insecurity blinds our eyes. Fear blinds our eyes. Self-interest blinds our eyes. Greed blinds our eyes. Intolerance blinds our eyes. Arrogance blinds our eyes. Prejudice blinds our eyes. Ignorance blinds our eyes. Narrow-mindedness blinds our eyes. We, centuries later, who think we are so enlightened and insightful, are still blind as bats when it comes to recognizing the right rider on this or any Palm Sunday.

So, just as Jerusalem did long ago, we say no to the one who rides into our lives on a donkey and a colt. We prefer another horseman. And can we expect a horseman to come? Will another pale rider come to save us? Most certainly we seem to think. After all, there's a horse-mounted zealot on every corner these days. Comes a horseman even now. We can make him out through our own waving palm branches.

He is riding through the media, in the violence that has become so normative that it is no longer shocking. He is riding through the political process, in the empty rhetoric of perfectly staged campaigning that leaves real issues completely unaddressed in waves of meaningless sound bites. The horseman is riding through the corporate jungle, leaving hardworking people worshiping in vain the god of upward mobility as they are economically devastated by the company's passionate pursuit of profits and complete lack of compassion. The horseman is riding through our lawsuit-driven judicial process, enabling us to claim we are helpless victims rather than responsible individuals. The horseman is riding through our city streets, attacking children, youth, and adults with his weapons of war: poverty, drugs, gang violence, domestic violence, depression, suicide.

Comes a horseman indeed. The horseman rides into our situation offering a completely different perspective on life than does the one who rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. The horseman we encounter is a fear-monger, not a peacemaker. This horseman sows seeds of hate; he doesn't cultivate love. This horseman builds bombs; he doesn't beat swords into plowshares. This horseman kills and maims; he doesn't heal and make whole. This horseman is quick to point out the sins of the world, but ever so slow to offer grace. This horseman demands judgment; he fails to demonstrate mercy. His answer is always destruction, never creation. He always works to divide, to make people enemies; he never labors to bring people together as brothers and sisters. This horseman peddles chaos, not community.

This horseman makes claims, to be sure, claims that appear so appealing to our eyes of stone: "Here is the truth made manifest; here are all the correct answers. Here is the only saving grace; there is no other way out of the mess we are in. I have come to teach the authentic word made flesh; follow my example and be your own god, safe and secure from all alarms. There is a 'master race' after all; everyone else is inferior and either must be eliminated or enslaved. Come and learn this doctrine and memorize this hype; let me dictate your every thought, word, and deed." So says the horseman who comes riding into our lives every day.

Comes a horseman. I can see the flaring nostrils of his mighty steed. I can see the light that is reflected off his helmet and shield. I can see the color of his banner. I can see the blood of our so-called enemies stained on the blade of his sword. Can you see him?

He has a credo that captures our attention: "We are right, and everyone else is wrong." He says all the things we want to hear. His answers to the complexities of life are always so simplistic, with spiritual slogans we can recite with our eyes closed. He makes all the promises of a charismatic leader: he sells us all the things we think we want; he guarantees that we will be healthy, wealthy, and wise; he lays out a vision for us that soothes our insecurities and plays to our obsession to be completely safe and in total control of our lives.

Comes a horseman. Will we see him better than the one for whom "Hosannas" were shouted on that first Palm Sunday? Will we direct our own "Hosannas" toward him instead? Will we wave our palm branches when he comes? Will he be the one who excites us, energizes us, and motivates us? Will we follow him instead of the one who rides into our lives on a set of humble animals? Will we follow him instead of the one who at week's end dies for us in the most shameful and scandalous way imaginable? Will we follow him instead of the one whose way is pure, unbounded, suffering love? Will we? Will we? Will we?

I pray to God that we won't. Not if we ever hope to see the way, the truth, and the life. Not if we ever hope to experience amazing grace. Not if we ever want to be made well and whole. Not if we ever hope to see life in God's kingdom. Not if we ever want to be embraced by unconditional love. Not if we ever want real peace and joy. Not if we ever hope to know what it truly means to be a blessed and beloved child of God [Words, phrases, and images for this sermon were taken from the song "The Balances of Life" by John Ellzey, performed originally by John as a response to this sermon on Palm/Passion Sunday, First United

Methodist Church of Sachse, March 31, 1996].