***EARTHSHAKING EVENTS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 5, 2020

Texts: Matthew 21:1-17 and Psalm 99:1-3

 One of the wonderful things about Scripture is that you can read the same passage at different points in time and find something entirely new or surprising in it. Whether it is a new insight that pops from the page or some experience that changes your perspective, familiar passages can suddenly appear in a new light. I remember a young mother telling me that the birth of her son changed forever her understanding of that familiar verse in John, “For God so loved the world that God gave his only son…” You may read the parable of the prodigal son one day and identify with the self-righteous son who stayed home, and another day identify with his prodigal brother and the poor choices he made, and another day relate to the father who welcomed the prodigal son home with open arms as you contemplate dealing with a rebellious child of your own. A new perspective, a changed circumstance, life experience may produce an *Aha!* moment with the text.

 So it is with this familiar passage from Matthew’s Gospel about Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem. I have preached Palm Sunday texts over twenty times across the years, at least five times from this same text in Matthew’s Gospel, and each time it comes around there is that unsettling question: Is there anything new here? Much is not new. Each time I read Matthew’s account I am struck by the absence of palms (only John gives us palms for Palm Sunday) and by how Matthew oddly describes Jesus riding on the back of two animals, straddling both a donkey and a colt, because he misreads the poetic parallelism in the prophecy of Zechariah:

 *Lo, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey,*

 *on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Instead of recognizing that the donkey is a colt, the young foal of a donkey, he concludes that there must be two animals that Jesus is riding – a donkey ***and*** a colt; he wants the reader to see that Jesus’ ride is the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy, and we get the point even though we doubt the accuracy of his double donkey description. Each year I am struck by the royal claims that are made by the crowd’s shouts of hosanna, even though it is Luke alone who puts the word *king* into their mouths. And I am always drawn to Matthew’s description of Jesus going right from the Palm Sunday parade to the temple where he overturns the tables and drives out the moneychangers before leaving the city and returning to Bethany that same night. All those things I have noted before, and perhaps you have too.

 But this year, reading the text in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first thing that leapt to my mind was: ***This crowd is not practicing social distancing!*** In my mind’s eye I saw them there lining the streets and bumping into one another in their excitement. What had always seemed like a festive parade that celebrated Jesus’ arrival to the holy city seemed a little more unsettling this year. Danger lurked there among the crowd, unseen in the form of COVID-19, and the people seemed totally unaware. I have that same experience watching replays of past events that have been cancelled this year due to the pandemic – NCAA basketball games played in an arena full of fans (UVA still wins!), a golf tournament with the patrons straining side-by-side to see if a putt drops, children knocking each other over in pursuit of Easter eggs – and not a mask or sign of social distancing in sight! COVID-19 has changed perspectives on ordinary events and made them seem riskier at best and virally dangerous at worst.

 The reality of that first Palm Sunday is that danger did lurk there in the crowd, not in the form of COVID-19, but in the person of the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees who saw in Jesus a threat to their authority and power. This Palm Sunday parade was not some innocent, spontaneous event! It was a royal entry orchestrated by Jesus who directed that the donkey be brought to him and rode down that road to shouts of hosanna, knowing that it would inflame the passions of those who opposed him. As Matthew describes it, “The whole city was in turmoil,” and at the heart of their turmoil was one question: ‘Who is this?’”

 The Greek word that is translated *turmoil* is rooted in a word that means *quaking* and from which we get our word *seismic*. It is the same word used to describe the reaction of Herod and all Jerusalem to the news of Jesus’ birth: *trembling* fear that led to the slaughter of the innocents. It is the word used to describe what happens when Jesus breathes his last on the cross: the earth *quakes* and the rocks were split and the tombs were opened. And it is the word used to describe the *shaking* of the ground as an angel rolls back the stone at the mouth of the tomb at Easter’s dawn. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to shouts of hosanna is that kind of earthshaking event, says Matthew – like Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem and Jesus’ death on the cross and the revealing of the empty tomb at Easter. It is an event that shakes the powers that be, the city, and all of creation! Now how could that be? On Palm Sunday the earth doesn’t shake; the angels don’t sing; what then makes this such an earthshaking event?

 Perhaps the appropriate words to answer that question are **fear** and **awe**. It was fear that caused the chief priests and scribes to shake as they saw the crowds adore Jesus with hosannas on the very doorstep of their city. Jerusalem was the center of their religious world. The chief priests and scribes had been curious and a little annoyed as they watched Jesus travel the dusty roads of Galilee proclaiming God’s coming kingdom. He proved himself a worthy adversary to the scribes and Pharisees who posed difficult questions along the way; his miracles were beyond explanation! But Jesus had not seemed to be a real threat to them until he rode up that road to their city with the crowds lining the streets hailing him as the royal Son of David. Jesus was bringing his fight to their turf, into the courtyards of their temple (which was supposed to be God’s temple) where he disrupted the day’s normal commerce by flipping the tables and dared to accuse them of making the Lord’s house into a den of robbers. As one writer notes:

*The Jesus who enters Jerusalem* ***was*** *and always* ***is*** *a challenge to this world’s powers and principalities – not merely a spiritual challenge but a political challenge as well.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The once distant threat had become an immediate threat with the power of an adoring crowd behind him, and it caused the self-righteous hearts of the religious establishment in Jerusalem to tremble with fear.

 For the crowd it was not fear but ***awe*** that shook their world. In Jesus they saw and heard the promise of a prophet who might be something more – perhaps a king, a messiah! They heard him speak of God’s Kingdom. They watched him perform miracles that no one else could do. The buzz he generated was the buzz of possibility and hope, the buzz of prophecy finally fulfilled. To those who asked, “Who is this?” the answer echoed in a repeated refrain: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!” The quaking in the hearts and knees of the crowd was awe at the possibility that he might be God’s chosen One, the king!

 Thus began that series of earthshaking events that mark this Holy Week – a parade down from the Mount of Olives and up to Jerusalem, the agony of the cross, the discovery of the empty tomb at Easter’s dawn – earthshaking events they were and are, or rather, should be. ***But do they shake your world anymore?*** Is there any awe left in you with which to raise your hosannas this Palm Sunday or is the story too old and familiar? Is your world rocked by the remembrance of nails being driven through Jesus’ hands and feet and his cry of *Eli, Eli, lema sabach thani* ?(*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*) Is there any trembling hope with which you look ahead to Easter’s rosy promise of resurrection, or has it all become too familiar, taken for granted, a tale too often told to shake your world anymore?

 If so, then stop and look around. The world is in turmoil yet again; the source of that turmoil is this COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted our lives and has shaken our hearts and hopes with new fears. People are trembling in fear of COVID-19 as it races closer, and into this turmoil God comes to say: ***Do not fear!*** ***Be awed!*** ***Remember this Holy Week with trembling awe and hope and assurance that death never has the last word. For I am with you! Always I am with you***! Trust that promise! In the face of all the uncertainties and fears of this COVID-19 virus we rise this day to shout and sing, “Hosanna!” Hosanna to the Messiah of God! Hosanna to Jesus the Christ who comes to save us!

 Hosanna literally means “save us”; it is a shout of defiant hope in the face of all from which we need saving – including COVID-19. So shout hosanna within the walls of your home wherever it is, in the streets of your neighborhood and in all the highways and byways of the world! Shout hosanna in your life and through your life, this day and in these viral days to come. For the One **of whom** we sing, the One **to whom** we shout, the One **in whom** we trust is the One who comes to save us – from COVID-19, from sin and death, and from all that might shake our world! Do not shake in fear of this virus; tremble with awe at what God has done and is doing and will yet do in our midst! Trust the promises of God that we recall with trembling awe this Holy Week! And then shout your hosannas! Hosanna to the One who comes in the name of the Lord – to save us! Amen

1. James O. Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor eds., Westminster John Knox Press: 2010, p.156 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)