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The National Presbyterian Church

A Pharisee Asks the Right Question

John 12:12-19; Luke 19:37-40

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Today is Palm Sunday. All four Gospels tell of the entry into the city of Jerusalem of Jesus of Nazareth on this day that we call Palm Sunday. Luke and John especially are interested in the response of the people and also the response of some of those who are troubled and upset by what they saw on this day.

John, the 12th Chapter, narrates what happened on Palm Sunday. Remember, last week we saw the raising of Lazarus in Chapter 11. And in Chapter 12, John says this, "The next day, the great crowd that had come to the festival..." That would be the Feast of Passover that the people have come from all around to watch and to be a part of and to share in. That most solemn of all the feasts in the Jewish feast year, Passover. "And so 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." Only John tells us about the palm branches. The other Gospel writers tell us about clothes that people put on the road from Mount of Olives down across the Valley Kidron and the Beautiful Gate into the city.

The palm branches are very interesting and John, who loves details, noticed that. 150 B.C., Judas Maccabeus and his brothers led a revolt, a very famous revolt in Jewish history. They led it against the Seleucid Empire, and they had a temporary victory. That victory is celebrated—in all of Judaism, the Feast of Hanukkah, a feast that celebrates the victory of Judas Maccabeus. Judas Maccabeus had a crest that he made for his family because for 100 years the Maccabean family were the kings of Israel during that lull between the Seleucid Empire and the coming of the Romans in 80 B.C. And so he had a crest, and in the crest, palm branches were placed around the crest. Therefore, the use of palm branches is a highly nationalistic and messianic moment. And if you were a CIA agent for the Roman Empire, you'd realize this doesn't bode well. There are a lot of nationalistic memories because Judas Maccabeus had led a revolt against the Seleucids. Are these folks on the entry road planning a revolt against the Romans? Who knows? But John wants us to know that palm branches by children and adults were put down, perhaps reminding them of the Judas Maccabeus moment in Jewish history.

And then they sang a song. Notice, "They put palm branches and went out shouting or singing Hosanna." By the way, that's not "Praise the Lord." Praise the Lord would be "Hallelujah." *Hosanna* literally in Hebrew means, "Help us, Lord." "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel." A profoundly messianic line from the *Hallel*. The *Hallel* is made up of Psalms 113 to 118 and was sung by the Jewish nation at the two greatest feasts. They were sung at Passover by the people. They knew them by heart. They were sung also in Feast of Tabernacles. That song is very messianic. It thanks God for the Exodus out of Egypt, and thanks God that He has raised up His ensign. In fact, a famous line in the *Hallel* is, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone of the house." And then they sing hosanna. They sang it to Jesus as he enters the city.

And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it was written. And now, John quotes Zechariah, "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 remember that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and

raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him.”

It is John that gives us that evidence. If we only had Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we are a little mystified as to why a great crowd would show up on Palm Sunday. He hasn't been to Jerusalem that much according to them. But John lets us know that the rumor had spread about the raising of Lazarus, and that's one of the reasons for the great crowd. “It was because they had heard that he performed this sign that the crowd went to meet Him.”

The Pharisees now, the Pharisee movement is a group of lay theologians. They're not clergy. They are lay theologians, lawyers. Sometimes they're called scribes and Pharisees but they were a group that had their origins at the time of the Judas Maccabeus' revolt. That's when we first meet the Pharisees in Jewish history. And they were freedom fighters, originally, and then they became separatists, and that's what the word Pharisee means. They were laymen who were very concerned about Jewish law and preserving it and also about the fulfillment of their holy history.

The Pharisees then have a talk with each other when they see Jesus coming into the city and it bothers them. And so they said to each other, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him.” That's an interesting line recorded by John. Now move to Luke's Gospel because Luke has one more line from the Pharisees. It's also very significant.

In the 19th Chapter of Luke, he also narrates the coming into Jerusalem and started it with Verse 36. “As Jesus rode along, the people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. And as he was now approaching the path from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen; saying ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven.’” Again, from the *Hallel*.

Now once again, the Pharisees are alarmed. They're the ones that are most interested in Jesus. It's not the high priests that are interested in Jesus. They only come in at the end, the Sadducees. It's the Pharisees that are always talking to Jesus. The Pharisees, some of them, said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” See, they recognized the significance of what had

been said when the people are singing the *Hallel*. They recognized the significance of the palm branches, too, probably. So they said, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." And he answered them, and now comes a cryptic, hidden, mysterious answer from Jesus. Jesus will often do this. When he chased the money changers out of the temple, the Pharisees said, "What sign do you have to show for this?" And he answered with a cryptic line, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it." What's that supposed to mean? John has to add, "He said this about His own body." But they misunderstood him. Here's a hidden sentence again. The Pharisees in the crowd said, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." And Jesus answered, "I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout out."

Well the people signal their own affirmation of who Jesus is as the fulfillment of the messianic hope, with the Palm branches and with the *Hallel*. The Pharisees, these lay theologians, see the significance of this and they notice it, that's why they raised the right questions. And then Jesus gives an answer to them. The answer is hidden. "If they were silent, the rocks would cry out." What is that suppose to mean? What does that mean then and what does that mean to us now? "If they were quiet, the rocks would cry out."

First of all, it's a prediction. It's a predication that Jesus makes of what is going to happen during this very week, Holy Week. The people are so affectionate, they are so emotional, they're shouting out with this great song. Their faith is subjective on the Sunday we call Palm Sunday, but they will be mute by Friday. We know that. They will be silent by Friday. They are not going to be shouting out praise, some of them may actually be a part of the jeering crowd that cries out, "Crucify Him!" We don't know. Or maybe they're just quiet, silent. So in a way, this is a prediction that Jesus says, "If they were silent, the rocks would cry out."

In other words, Jesus is saying that today their faith, which is subjective, highly charged with emotion and, emotional content; is their statement of faith, and it is being affirmed. I am subjectively their Lord, today. By Friday, I will not be subjectively their Lord. They are not going to be shouting out "Praise the Lord." They're not going to be shouting "hosanna" on Friday. No one does. Everyone is going to flee. Even his best friends are going to hide in fear. Peter will deny him three times on Thursday night. Only the women will show up at the cross, and one young boy named John who can be there

probably because people won't notice him. But nobody else will be there. They're all going to be quiet on Good Friday. And Jesus Christ will not be subjectively affirmed by the people, He will not be called Lord. But he will be objectively Lord even when they stop saying he is Lord. And that's how I understand "the rocks would cry out." The rocks are objective. They're not subjective. Rocks don't have emotion, but the rocks are going to cry out that Jesus is objectively Lord even when the people don't say it.

Is Jesus Christ only Lord when we say he is Lord? Or is he Lord even if we don't say he's Lord? That's a huge question. What does this mean? It means that Jesus will win for us and for all humanity, on Good Friday and Easter, a great victory over sin, death, and the power of evil, and he'll do it all by himself; we will not be there cheering him on. We will not be there helping him to do it. He will do it alone. "This cup, let it pass, but I'll take it." He took the cup, not the disciples. They were asleep. They don't take the cup. He takes it. He will do it. We will be silenced because of fear or maybe because subjective faith has shifted or even been set aside. We have faith now, but then we won't. That's why a lot of people have a bittersweet feeling about Palm Sunday. We see all the praise of the Joyous crowd and we know its silence by Thursday night. In only four days.

When World War II was over, the World Council of Churches was established. Thank God for that. I'm so grateful for the establishment of the World Council of Churches. Our Presbyterian Church is a part of it. A great number of denominations are members of the World Council. And when it was started, first in Amsterdam and then Evanston, they wrote together a Confession of Faith. But at their very first meeting, Karl Barth, the great theologian, spoke to the founders of the World Council but he—instead of cheering them on for the great Confession of Faith they had written, he challenged it.

They had written this Confession of Faith, as the first affirmation of faith of the World Council. "We are a fellowship of churches that confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior." There is nothing wrong with that Confession of Faith. It's very Palm Sunday. It's very rich. It's very subjective. It's very beautiful, and you and I should say it, "We are a fellowship of churches that confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior." But Karl Barth challenged it. He said that Confession of Faith is not good enough. We've just been through the tragedy of the Third Reich. We've just been through a time

when the Christian Church in Germany lost a lot of its faith. And so Karl Barth said, "That's not what it should read. It should read this way: that we are a fellowship of churches that confess Jesus Christ the Lord, not just our Lord. He is the Lord whether we say it or not." We don't create His lordship; He is Lord whether we agree or not.

And so seven years later, the World Council changed its Confession of Faith and they changed it to this, to become one of the great Confessions of Faith, I think, in Christendom. "We are a fellowship of churches that confess Jesus Christ the Lord as God and Savior." But first Jesus is the Lord, he is objectively the Lord whether we say so or not, and that is a tremendous breakthrough of what happened on Good Friday and Easter. And so, the good question that the Pharisees ask, our Lord answers it in a profound way. If they were silent, and they will be, the rocks will cry out.

But, folks, I don't think we should take lightly what happened on Palm Sunday because we know that people change and we know that people go adrift from sometimes great Confessions of Faith they make. I don't think we should read our own Palm Sundays lightly. So I don't want you to feel bittersweet about Palm Sunday. I want you to rejoice on Palm Sunday because the people did say it. They said the truth on Palm Sunday. They sang the *Hallel*. They praised Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Israel's hope and the hope of the whole world because that song is profounder than just a nationalistic, tribal hope for Israel. And in fact, the Pharisees noticed it. The whole world is going after him because many foreigners had come in to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. And they said, "Look, they're all going after Him." And that was literally what happened.

So we are grateful for what happened on Palm Sunday. The people said something that was true. And whenever you say something that is true in your life, then, even if you drift away from it later it stands as a marker in your life. If a young person or an older person says something that's true, it's a building block and you can always go back to it. Don't forget that. And you can live in the present with it. It's a building block if what you said was true, and they did say the truth. Just like the first confession of the World Council of Churches is a true confession. It just needs to be strengthened with the "the" which does not weaken the "our." He is our Lord, and they said it. Even if they waver away from it through temptations or maybe their own bad ambitions or fears and all the things that caused people to waver,

still what they said on Palm Sunday was true.

I've been a pastor a long time and I have, every once in a while, a chance to talk with people who are in distress. Maybe they're in distress over what's happened in relationships, what's happened in marriages, or what's happened in relationship between children and parents or parents and children. If I get a chance to talk to somebody who is in distress over brokenness in relationships, I always ask this kind of question if I can, "What did you first feel when you were first in love with the woman or the man that you married and when you said to that person, what did you say?" And the person will say, "Well, I said I love the person." "Did you mean it?" "Yeah." Then they'll say, "Yeah, but there is water over the damn now, a lot of other things have happened." But I ask, "But did you mean it?" Then that's a building block. Try to go to that building block rather than the complaints that have happened since. Try to go to what you first said. Find out if that is a building block you can build on again.

If what you said and what they said was true, you can build on it. You can stand on it. The Lord's Supper is a great moment for every one of us to stand on a great truth. Maybe there are people right here today who have wavered away from faith that you once held and felt strongly, but now, in a re-discovery, you realized that what you first said was true maybe it was in Sunday School. People asked Karl Barth when he was in the United States, "How would you describe your theology?" And he stunned the *Time Magazine* reporter by saying, "To describe my theology? Well, let's see. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That's a childhood song, and yet the greatest theologian of the 20th century decided to describe his faith with a childhood song because what I first sang, what I first felt, was true. I wavered with all kinds of other things during my life, but then I came back to that truth. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." I realize that it is true.

You can go back to what you said that was true. It's a building block and you can build on it. And when you come to the Lord's Table today, you come to this table not because you were there on Good Friday and helped Jesus out. You didn't. Nor did Peter, nor did John, nor did any of the other disciples. They fled. They were frightened. They were scared. But Jesus Christ did it and he did it in our favor.

I love the fact that when our Lord met Peter at the lake, in the final chapter of John's Gospel, he does not say to Peter three times, "Peter, did you love me?" That would be a tough question to ask someone because Peter knows of his denial. Our Lord did not ask him that. Three times like a master psychiatrist, if anyone was the greatest of all psychiatrists, it was Jesus. He didn't say that. He said, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter says, "I love you." "Do you love me?" "I love you." "Do you love me?" Then Peter got irritated and said, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you." Then Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Jesus brought Peter into the present tense with an early statement of a faith that he had first affirmed and in-between was a denial, but our Lord resolved the three denials with three present tense affirmations, and you can do that at the Lord's Table. You can take and affirm and claim the gift that Christ gives us here in this place right now.

Heavenly Father, thank you. Thank you that on Palm Sunday, the people said the truth, even though later they forgot it, but they said it. Lord, we have said a lot of things in our lives. Help us to realize the greatest things we said that were true and that we can build on at all times because they're true. Lord, thank you for that. And this, Lord's Supper, is built upon the truth. Thank you for that. And now we come to it in Christ's name. Amen.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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