As a part of an internship I had one summer at a church in North Carolina, I was asked to lead a children’s sermon for the first time. It was among the most challenging requirements of the summer. I can’t remember when I’ve been more nervous. We were in the midst of a sermon series on the various parts of the worship service, and so I decided to begin by asking the children which part of the service was their favorite. I should have known better. As my question was met with blank stares and one child stood up and began to wander around the chancel, I realized my miscalculation. Most of these children left the sanctuary after the children’s sermon, and many spent these first fifteen minutes doodling on a bulletin, playing with the one toy they were allowed to bring into church, or flipping through the hymnal. In desperation, I turned to the one child who always had the answer. Jenelle was my saving grace. “Jenelle,” I asked, “what is your favorite part of the worship service?” “Hmmm…” she thought for a moment, “Oh, I know! It’s the parade when it starts.” There was laughter in the congregation as folks considered the opening processional of choir and clergy, through the eyes of a child, as a parade.

Today, Jenelle gets it exactly right. Today is Palm Sunday and today churches all over the world begin with a parade—some even include a donkey! Today we remember the day when Jesus was welcomed to the Holy City of Jerusalem. The gospel writer Mark paints a vivid picture of Jesus riding through the city gates. Jesus, whose whole ministry has taken place in the rural regions of Galilee, comes into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. It is precisely how the prophet Zechariah had claimed the king of the Jews would come: “humble and lowly is he, riding on a donkey.” The crowds crammed into Jerusalem for the Passover celebration recognized immediately what Jesus was claiming. Some of them even dared to believe that the moment of their redemption, their salvation, their freedom from imperial oppression had finally arrived. Their king had come. And so they tore branches from the trees and the coats from their backs, and they shouted praise to God and to Jesus himself. Jesus’ popular appeal and fame had never been wider, his poll numbers never higher. The crowd is ready to follow him anywhere, with swords and clubs if necessary.

The word on their lips is Hosanna, a Hebrew expression taken directly from the Psalms. The phrase is a contraction of two words and it translates, “Save us!” There is more than celebration in the words of the crowd that day. There is desperate hope. Save us from the crushing weight of the Roman Empire. Save us from centuries of religious persecution and social alienation. Save us from suffering and conflict. The crowd that gathers around Jesus finds hope in the symbolism of the moment. They long to be saved. They pray that this new king will wrestle the throne away from hated Herod Antipas. So they shout, “Blessed is he who comes in God’s name.” Not Caesar’s name. Hosanna! Save us!” To the people of both religious and political power in Jerusalem, these are unsettling words, a threat to the status quo and the so-called peace of Rome. In just a few days, the hopeful shouts will be silenced; the parade will take a different route.

In parades of joy this morning, children enter sanctuaries waving palm leaves wildly. We sing words of jubilation and triumph: “All Glory, Laud, and Honor to thee Redeemer King.” But our worship will not end with glory, or laud, or honor. Those of you who have taken a moment to look ahead in your bulletin know that before we get out of here we will sing more halting and somber words, “Beneath the cross of Jesus…”

The cross? Today? Can’t we ignore its shadow on this festive day? Can’t we join the writer Anne Lamott, who admits, “I don’t have the right personality for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday school, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you’re talking”.

But this paradoxical day on the church calendar does not give us the option of hopping ahead to Easter. By the end of today’s service, we will have traded in our palms and will be bracing ourselves for a Holy Week journey to the cross.

The disciples should have known this is where it would lead. This crew of twelve has enjoyed front row seats to the controversy surrounding this man whom some called prophet, some Messiah, some revolutionary, some blasphemous heretic. At the exact midway point of Mark’s gospel, Jesus turned to
the disciples on the road with two key questions. The first is merely descriptive. Who do people say that I am? What have you heard on the street and in the fields about me? Well, the disciples have some good answers; they’ve been listening and they repeat the suggestions they’ve heard. They name Elijah, John the Baptist, the ancient prophets, passing this first test with flying colors. This is what the public opinion polls show.

But Jesus is not finished with them. The next question goes far deeper, becomes much more personal and hard-hitting, it moves from description to confession. Who do you say that I am? It is the question that stands at the heart of this sacred week—who is Jesus?

Peter, as usual, is the bravest and boldest of the disciples and he responds with immediate certainty: “You are the Messiah.” From my vantage point, the answer is spot-on. Peter has hit the bulls-eye. And yet, there is something missing. We know this because Jesus silences Peter, then begins to predict his own suffering and death. The juxtaposition is one of the oddest in all of scripture. Peter confesses his faith in Jesus, and Jesus responds with painful words of suffering and death. It is as if he wants to communicate two things at once: yes, Peter is right, Jesus is the Messiah. But he is not the Messiah that Peter expects or desires. This Messiah is bound for the cross. And, so are we. If you want to be my followers, deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me. The hard truth is that it is not enough to confess Jesus as a Messiah, to wave palms and sing with joy. We follow this Messiah, the one who will question our deepest allegiances and demand absolute discipleship. The one who requires us to move from selfishness to generosity, from fear to love, from hatred to compassion, from the narrowness of self-righteousness to the wideness of mercy. If we want to follow this Messiah, it’s going to take more than a parade, it’s going to take a journey to the cross. Each of us will have to decide this week: will we muster the courage to commit our lives to a savior whose redemption comes not through violent conquest or flashy displays of power? Will we follow Jesus even if that means changing our understanding of salvation? Can we accept a God who would rather die than lose us?

While serving as a chaplain one summer at a children’s hospital, I met a young mother whose five-month-old twins had not been able to leave the neonatal intensive care unit. Every morning, she was there. Every night, she was there. Holding. Praying. Crying. Waiting. Pleading. Rituals of love and compassion. “How do you do it?” this novice chaplain asked. With a look that showed wisdom beyond her nineteen years, the mother simply responded, “My babies. There is nothing I wouldn’t do.”

If we want to know what salvation means, we will have to go all the way to the cross. Only in its shadow will we see that God’s power is not displayed in coercive force, but in wondrous, sacrificial love. We would not have done it this way. But we don’t get the God we choose. We get the God who chooses us; the God who chose the power of a cross to bring life and light to a dark, dead world.

There is something deeply personal about this journey of Lent. When the people cried “Save us!” I imagine their minds were filled with those shadows that stole their life and their joy. The urgency and intimacy are no less powerful today. From what do you need to be saved? Which shadow has overtaken you? Do you need to be saved from your relentless perfectionism? From self-criticism? From self-doubt? From fear of what is to come? Do you need to be rescued from anger or bitterness? Saved from a festering grudge or unspoken feelings of hurt? Will your salvation come in letting go of a self-image that was never meant for you and embracing a new sense of identity? Can you be redeemed from a life spent pursuing those things that will turn to ash, and instead chasing God’s dream for your life? Salvation comes in so many beautiful forms.

This week, the road will be hard. We will walk through the streets of Jerusalem as the tide begins to turn against this prophet. We will witness a trial filled with corruption, injustice, and abuse of power. We will climb a hill called Golgotha where this parade turned to funeral processional. Where women cried out, disciples deserted and fled, Romans mocked, and the blessed one who comes this day in the name of the Lord was nailed to a tree. We will stand in the shadow of the cross, where this journey could have ended. Where the whole world thought it did end. After all, weakness cannot defeat power. Love is not stronger than hate. But listen...today the people are crying out, “Hosanna! Save us!” Just wait. He will.

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