

Palm Sunday 2010
Revelation 19: 1 – 10
Salvation and Glory and Power - Hallelujah!

NRSV Revelation 19:1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants." 3 Once more they said, "Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever." 4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" 5 And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great." 6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; 8 to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"-- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

This is the word of the Lord...Thanks be to God.

The past six years I have been asked more about Revelation than any other book in the Bible. I think there are several reasons for this – the popularity of the Left Behind series of fictional novels; the crash of markets around the world; the specter of terrorism and the preying upon fears by those who would have us believe that the only end of history is a conflict of civilizations; the uncertainties over the future of our nation as specters of debt and political instabilities continue to dominated headlines; this strange season of horrible earthquakes.

The old Chinese curse goes something like, “May you be so lucky as to live in interesting and eventful times.”

I think this is why I have so often been asked about Revelation. People want a sign. People want assurance. Does Revelation have a word of assurance – or is it a word of judgment and warning? Can it be both?

It was the theologian Krister Stendahl who once spoke to a group of aspiring preachers, and he said, “Do not go out assuming that everyone simply wants to know whether he or she is saved. What people want to know is this: does history have any meaning, any point, any hope.”¹

¹ David Bartlett – Journal for preachers – Easter 2010 page 12

Now as many of you know, I come from Louisiana – a place where people love parades. Good reasons, small reasons, great reasons, and no reasons, my folks love parades.

The Saints win the Super Bowl, they throw a parade.

The Mardi Gras comes before Lent, they throw a parade.

When someone dies, there is often a parade. It's called the second line.

Parades are community events and whether they are formal or informal, planned or impromptu, parades block streets and shut down sidewalks. They change the flow of everyday life. By their very nature they proclaim that “this is an important event.” They are showy and demonstrative – nothing is discreet about them. Nothing discreet about a marching band! It's hard to hide behind a cymbal! Parades happen because something important to the community or the town is at stake and the time must be set apart to march and make music with equal parts pomp and glee.

This is how I have always imagined Palm Sunday – like a grand street parade. Person to person, shop to shop, corner to corner, the word that Jesus is coming spreads out before him. The streets swell with folks from every corner of life – the rich and the poor rubbing shoulders together, the young and the old – everyone pressing in to get a glimpse of the prophet from Nazareth!

“Is he the Messiah?” the word goes out into the crowd – the rumor spreads more quickly than the word of the parade. “Will he have a sword of fire? Will he break the power of Rome today?”

From the moment Jesus approaches the city the parade is on and the palms are waved. They think they are having a parade for a coronation – a new king is in town – Hosana, Save Us! – they shout again and again and again. And with every block that Jesus rides through the adoration of the crowd gets louder their expectations get a little higher and their hopes a little loftier and the stakes keep getting raised. Finally changed has come and life seems to have a point -- there is a cause for hope -- that is why they yell Hosana! -- hope is what they want to hear about. The parade gives them the hope they need.

So what is at stake on Palm Sunday? Is it similar to what might be at stake today?

The reason why I ask this question – what is at stake? – is because it just may be the one question that connects us most closely to the writer of Revelation and the times in which he lived. The back story behind the book of Revelation begins as a success. The church starts with a flourish in Asia Minor – from Ephesus to Collosae to Laodicea to Sardis – all the major cities of what was ancient Turkey. The Apostle Paul brings the words of grace and faith of Jesus to the gentiles, to the Greeks and to the Romans, and they ate it up! The church begins with a bang!

But, by the time Revelation is written, 30 years after, much had changed. Paul had drifted into legend and to heavenly glory. The church had aged, becoming acculturated and accommodating. And Jesus through the vision to John begin laying a series of critiques and correctives upon the churches and the people in them – you are bland he told one, you are lukewarm he said to another, you are asleep he said, you are self-righteous he warned. Why the criticism? Well because the very survival of the church was at stake. The Anti-Christ – represented most fully in Rome and its inexhaustible empire – seemed to be at every turn opposing the gospel with power, capital, and sheer force of might.

What was at stake?

At stake was the propagation of the gospel and the survival of the church – the very investments in faith and people that Paul had made and that God had made through Paul.

I think more than anything else, this is what the Book of Revelation forces us to do: it says, "take stake of where we are and where our church is." Is God's creation of the world and investment in us as stewards of the earth working out? Where are we on that balance sheet? Is God's invention of the church paying a dividend? Does this wash out?

By the time we get to Revelation 19 – God's love and lordship is praised and God's power is confirmed. The great ills on the earth have been defeated. The powers of evil have been vanquished and they are burning in an inexhaustible fire. The multitudes of heaven are rejoicing. And everyone is shouting – shouting like thunderpeals, like thunder – Hallelujah! Praise God! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Three times the heavenly host shouts Hallelujah!

It is worth noting that this moment, this moment in Revelation 19, is the only time that the word Hallelujah appears in the New Testament. It is in the Old Testament more than 20 times – mostly in the Psalms (the Hallal Psalms - praise psalms). But in the New Testament this transliteration of the Hebrew – hallal / to praise and yah / God (Yahweh) – only happens here in Revelation 19. It is a singular moment. So singular is the source text – the biblical basis for Handel's Hallelujah Chorus (you can look it up on the notes that accompany the score - it says Revelation 19) – "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

Just like Palm Sunday is a singular moment. There is nothing like it in Jesus' life. It is a moment of singular praise. The crowds shout Hosanna! Hosanna! Save Us! Usually Jesus is trying to get folks to listen and pay attention because they are too busy in their lives to pay him much mind - they are indifferent and not interested. On Palm Sunday Jesus couldn't get the attention of the crowd if he had wanted to – because the party is on and they are too busy with the parade. In one instance they are not interested in him, and in the other they are too interested in him, too concerned with the parade.

The connection of course is that both moments are unique. Hosanna is used no where else in the New Testament except here in the Palm Sunday story. Hallelujah is only

heard in Revelation 19. Both times the multitudes are lost in moments of praise. They are lost in praise!

One of the laments that Pastors have is that we became preachers in part because we like to hear good preaching. But because we are preaching we don't get to hear others' preaching all that often. So we read other sermons and listen to recordings and recently I heard a sermon by the Rev. Elizabeth Gabbard who was our summer intern minister back in 2005. Elizabeth was talking about the heart weighed down by burden and depression. The heart gets heavy, she said. The Holy Spirit allows grace shows up, she told her church, in little acts of praise and every time we praise it is as if the Spirit lifts away that burden, one stone at a time -- just like we can move a mountain of rocks one stone at a time. Our praise is our release. In other words, praise matters. Our Hosannas and our Hallelujahs really matter. They really count.

So what is at stake on Palm Sunday? When is the last time we stopped what we were doing and we just praised the God of the living?

One of the problems with our praise and our parades is that not everyone enjoys them. Some people are parade averse. Often parades are equal part lament and celebration. Think of the returning troops just landed at Fort Bragg. The crowd cheers the soldiers walk in formation. There is joy. Except for the family who remains at home – their father has been lost – and the parade for them is a reminder of what price has been paid.

Think of the book of Ezra – there is a new temple. The people long exiled have restored the sacred places of Jerusalem and from the crowd there is a great shout as a festival breaks out. Only the volume is not singular – the crowd is divided. One half celebrating the new temple that is come. The other half lamenting the old one that is lost.

When I close my eyes I think about Palm Sunday and I can see them – those to whom the parade was an insult. The Palm Sunday break out is a threat to the powers in the world. To be sure the Romans knew about parades, they held them all the time. One of their oldest traditions in fact was the *Roman triumphalis* – the Roman Triumph parade. These parades were signs of strength – very showy and very public demonstrations of wealth and power. Roman armies paraded all over the ancient world.²

One wonders of the Roman guard taking it all in – wondering if the mob would get out of hand? You think about the priests in the temple seeing not the joy in the street but a threat riding on a colt?

Good news for some is often bad news for others. It is akin to that painful quotation from Gore Vidal – “Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little.”

So when Jesus rides into Jerusalem, what then will happen? The stakes are raised – he can no longer be a leader in the country side. When he rides into the city he rides as a

² See also the *vir triumphalis* – the man of triumph celebration.

threat to some and a savior to others. The question is, what will happen? Will the parade be a triumph or will it be a lament? Will the jealousy get the better of them?

Each and every year we arrive at the this moment – when the Hosanna on Sunday turns into a “hmpff” by mid week. It is when all the energy vacates or vacuums like air running out of a balloon. The crowd who loves on Sunday, that takes to the street on rumors of Jesus’ arrival will gather on Friday to shout for his death. It is as awful an irony as any we know - it is among the most terrible moments in our Bibles.

What is it that gets us to praise and offer thanksgiving? The market at 14,000? The football team winning the state championship? Closing a sale on piece of property? A refund check on your federal taxes? The day you retired? The beautiful sounds of children’s voices singing? What is it that gets us to praise?

I ask this because it is easy to forget these earthly and earthbound parades of praise, correct? – because the market doesn’t stay at 14,000, and as a life-long New Orleans Saints fan I can tell you that the football team will lose, and the closing can fall through, and taxes – well we don’t get refunds every year, do we?

Several decades ago the songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote a song that has become iconic - - thanks to multiple recordings and lots of play in movies and on television. The song is titled “Hallelujah,” just like the words in Revelation 19 and listen to this verse – both for the biblical references to King David and to Sampson, but also for the irony in its lyric, it captures the irony of Palm Sunday in a nearly perfect metaphor:

“hallelujah...

well your faith was strong but you needed proof
you saw her bathing on the roof
her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you
she tied you to her kitchen chair
she broke your throne and she cut your hair
and from your lips she drew the hallelujah”

Praise to God balanced with the ironies of life. “Your faith was strong but needed proof.” Prove it to us Jesus the crowd says on Monday. We think you are lying to us they think on Tuesday. By Wednesday - your proof was all wrong! By Thursday they have washed their hands and by Friday -- he wasn’t the Messiah at all. “Your faith was strong but needed proof.” Hubris makes the mighty fall. It turns the praise of Sunday into the disappointment of Friday.

It may just be that our Hallelujahs are always full of this irony. From Hosanna on Palm Sunday to the Hallelujah chorus of the heavenly host in Revelation 19 – this is what is at stake. We need the praise, we need the parade – it is a matter of our spiritual self, we were not made to be spiritual shells, we were created for praise. The life devoid of praise is hardly a life at all. Praise is evidence of blessing.

Yet we always want more. That the Hosannas of Palm Sunday and the Hallelujahs of Revelation are joined in this way - I have no doubt. Both serve as warnings in this way: it is so easy to praise and forget, it is easy to parade and regret.

The stakes of praise are mighty indeed.

Our praise is a declaration of faith that our lives matter and that history has a point, that it is in the hands of God. Our praise is our first act of trust. May we not be like those crowds on Palm Sunday who demanded proof and lost their trust in Jesus and sent him to the cross too quickly.

May God give us grace that we will take the call to praise to heart. May our praise -- Hosannas and Hallelujahs -- not be in vain, but able and strong to stand the test of disappointment.

Thanks be to God for this word of call and promise from Revelation 19, and thanks be to God that Jesus rode in to the Hosannas and had the courage to live through Holy Week.

Amen.