

“Blessed”

Palm Sunday April 5, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

Dr. Jim Davis

The other night at the dinner table my son Drew brought it up again. Do you remember, he said, when we all saw Aladdin. It happened in 2004 and our family has never forgotten it.

We were in California for Carolyn’s parents 50th wedding anniversary and because of all the grandchildren, Ned and Margaret had chosen to celebrate their anniversary at Disneyland. So that day before dinner we were walking through the newer part of the park called California Adventure and we walked into a replica of a Broadway theatre.

We sat down in the first row of the balcony and watched the story of Aladdin come to life right in front of us, complete with flying carpets, bandits, a princess and a magic lamp. And it’s that magic lamp that makes the story so memorable, isn’t it? And the genie that comes out of it. And the three wishes the genie grants Aladdin. They make the story memorable, don’t they?

In fact I can remember walking out of the show with Drew who was only seven at the time and listening to him say, “Dad that was great. I’ll never forget it!” And he hasn’t. And neither have most of the rest of us.

It’s a story that when we read it or see it on stage captures more than just our attention. It captures our imagination. It captures something deep inside us because something deep inside us would really love to simply name what we desire and make it happen, wouldn’t we? Wouldn’t we?

That’s what the crowds on that first Palm Sunday were doing, I think. They were naming their desire. They were shouting their wish. “Hosanna!” It’s a combination of two words in Hebrew, and together they mean “Save us!”

The word was used in Jesus’ day in connection with the festival of *Sukkoth*, the Feast of Booths where the Jews would build booths or tents to remind themselves

of their ancestors who had dwelt in tents as God led them through the wilderness, and save them day after day by providing food for them in them in the desert.

For seven days the scrolls were read that told the story and people would pray and sing “Hosanna! Save us too, O God.” It was a way to thank God for the fall harvest and pray for the winter rains. It was a prayer and wish all rolled up into one.

And then, on the seventh day of *Sukkoth*, the festival would climax with a final great Hosanna followed by these words “*Kol mevasser, mevasser ve-omer!*” It means, “the voice of the herald, heralds and says ...” The “herald” is the prophet Elijah and we start reading about him today in the Daily Walk Bible. And the last words of the Old Testament predict that Elijah will return and herald the messiah.

So as the children of Jesus’ day grew up and celebrated *Sukkoth* each year they learned that the festival finished with a wish, “Hosanna! God save us! May the voice of the herald, herald and tell us soon that the day of the Lord has arrived, that Messiah has come!”

And now, with that background perhaps you can begin to understand what was really happening on that first Palm Sunday. The first word shouted by the crowd, Matthew tells us was this word, “Hosanna.” It was their first wish. “Save us, God! Save us now!” But along with this first wish the crowd had two more.

Their second wish was expressed in their next few words, for they spoke of Jesus as “the Son of David.” “Save us,” they shouted, “save us Son of David.” This week you I read the story, and we read it again this morning, didn’t we? The story of how David showed Israel which of his sons was to become their king.

“Take Solmon and my officers down to Gihon spring.” It’s a natural spring near the road that leads down from the Mount of Olives. “Solomon is to ride on my mule. There Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet are to anoint him king over Israel. Then blow the trumpets and shout, ‘Long live King Solomon!’ And when you bring him back here, he will sit on my throne ...”

And David’s words go on, but this is all we really need, isn’t it? All we really need to understand the second wish of the crowd on Palm Sunday. They wished

not only for God to save them. They wished for God to make Jesus a true Son of David and their true king.

For as Solomon was shown to be David's true Son as Israel's true king on a day when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey from the base of Mount of Olives, Jesus was now riding into Jerusalem on the same animal, from the same direction. And he was riding toward the temple that Solomon built. Surely the second wish of the crowd was about to come true.

Before it comes true though, the crowd has one more wish. It's their third and last wish. It's a wish for a blessing upon Jesus and upon them, a blessing from God, "Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It's a recognition that God's blessing already rests on Jesus and a wish that a further blessing will come through him to his people.

And with that third wish still ringing in the air, Jesus, Matthew rode into Jerusalem. But now that you know that Palm Sunday is a day full of wishes, I wonder, what are your wishes this morning? If you could shout out three wishes in Jesus' direction, like the crowds did in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, what would they be? Would you wish something for yourself, for your family, for the whole nation? What would you wish for today? What do you want Jesus to do for you?

Of course, when you put it like that, it sounds a little bit like Aladdin again, doesn't it? But maybe that will help us all realize the truth about Palm Sunday. Jesus' has not come to Jerusalem to fulfill the three wishes of a crowd. He has come to do the will of his Father. He has not come to give us whatever we want. He has come to give us what we most need. He has not come to give us a life full of blessings. He has come to give us the blessing of eternal life.

No friends, Jesus is not a genie who has come to us to grant our wishes. But he is God's messiah and he has come this morning to ride into each of our minds and each of our hearts. He has come to make a way for each of us to discover not what we want for ourselves, but what God wants for us, the blessing of eternal life. Are you ready to give up your three wishes for God's one wish for you?

Let's pray

Hip-hop music artist Mary J. Blige was asked the following question in an interview: "Mary, you're a devout Christian; how do you reconcile bling with God?"

She responded: "My God is a God who wants me to have things. He wants me to bling! He wants me to be the hottest thing on the block. I don't know what kind of God the rest of y'all are serving, but the God I serve says, 'Mary, you need to be the hottest thing this year, and I'm gonna make sure you're doing that.' My God's the bomb!"

"Dear Superstar: Mary J. Blige," Blender (May 2006), page 58; submitted by Derek Chinn, Portland, Oregon

Under scrutiny by his apartheid government's Eloff Commission, South African bishop and Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu declared:

There is nothing the government can do to me that will stop me from being involved in what I believe God wants me to do. I do not do it because I like doing it. I do it because I am under what I believe to be the influence of God's hand. I cannot help it. When I see injustice, I cannot keep quiet, for, as Jeremiah says, when I try to keep quiet, God's Word burns like a fire in my breast.

But what is it that they can ultimately do? The most awful thing that they can do is to kill me, and death is not the worst thing that could happen to a Christian.

Richard H. Schmidt, Glorious Companions: Five Centuries of Anglican Spirituality (William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 328

At 84, Tom White has almost achieved his life's goal—to give away his entire fortune. White is a Boston businessman who has given away \$75 million. When people ask him "why," he responds with "give me three reasons I shouldn't," and then proceeds to give three reasons he should: "I can't take it with me, my kids are okay, and my wife's taken care of." He'll also tell you, "I'm motivated a lot by what Jesus wants me to do...and I think he wants me to help make the world a better place."

Tom White has been on the boards of Harvard Divinity School, Boston College, the JFK Library, and the New England Patriots (his company built Foxboro Stadium). But his proudest relationship is with the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, Haiti. He's involved in health and justice projects there. When his alma mater, Harvard University, calls for a donation, he says, "For God's sake, you've got \$15 billion over there, and I've got people over here starving to death. You tell me what should I do." Then with a chuckle he adds, "I still give \$1,000 a year so my classmates will talk to me."

Tom White's one regret? "I'm sorry I don't have more money to give away."

Jeffrey Arthurs, South Hamilton, Massachusetts; source: Boston Globe (3-23-04)