

Do You Hear What These Children Are Saying?

A sermon based on Matthew 21:12-17.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A pastor, who has a large family, likes to tell the story of one hectic Sunday morning. His son couldn't find his belt. He and his wife looked for it, but they couldn't find it either. The pastor was getting more and more frustrated as the clock kept running and he was going to be late for church. Then his son, who was seven or eight, asked a simple question, "Dad, have you prayed about it?"

That question knocked the wind right out of the pastor's sails. Who had spent the last seven or eight years teaching his son to pray when he was in need? And who remembered to apply that lesson in a moment of frustration?

During the season of Lent this year, in our midweek services, we've been considering the ironies of the passion...ironies, things that happen that we wouldn't expect. You wouldn't expect a child to take a minister to school on such a basic matter of faith. But that's what the Scriptures say about children and their faith in Jesus. Today is Palm Sunday. We've already sang, "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna." This morning, we want to consider the incident that inspired that stirring hymn. We want to see the irony in the question Jesus' enemies asked: **Do you hear what these children are saying?**

Oddly enough, it wasn't the events of Palm Sunday that actually inspired this hymn but what happened the day after. What I read for the gospel is not your typical Palm Sunday text. But what we have is the children's response to the wonderful things they had seen...and it wasn't Jesus riding into Jerusalem, being given a king's welcome, although, maybe they still had the joyous song the crowds sang the day before still stuck in their heads.

So, what things were so wonderful? Well, what does *wonderful* mean? "Really good!" right? That's true. However, the Greek word here means more than that. It means something that causes people to wonder—to be amazed. Jesus did things on this day that caused people's mouths to hang open in surprise, things that caused people to praise God for his unexpected blessings....especially the children.

So, again, what things were so wonderful? As much as the great triumphal entry into Jerusalem certainly caused people to sit up and wonder, again, this incident happened after that...the next day. So on Monday of Holy Week, Jesus went to the temple. What did he find there? Something not so wonderful. Money changers and merchants. Remember, this was the week of Passover. God's law required every Jewish male to come to Jerusalem to celebrate this festival. Jews were coming from all over the world. God allowed people who came from far away to purchase their lambs for the Passover meal at the temple.

However, the priests and money-changers, and merchants were less than faithful in this practice. The money-changers manipulated the exchange rates, on purpose, so they could make more money. The merchants overcharged for the lambs. It was kind of like buying a hot dog at a football game. It costs a whole lot more there than it does at the grocery store.

They were cheating the people. And while the Bible doesn't make the connection for us, most of the writers from that time do—the priests were getting a cut. So Jesus drove out the money changers and

those selling livestock; he called them thieves. He cleared out the impurity from the temple. That was the first wonderful thing—the first amazing thing—he did that day.

The second was different, and yet it was the same. Matthew writes, ***“The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.”*** Now, Jesus had been healing people for three years. Yet he did it one last time, before his ministry ended. And there was even a third wonderful thing, a third miracle Jesus did that day. He produced a response of faith. Children were shouting in the temple courts, ***“Hosanna to the Son of David!”*** Obviously, they had marched the day before with the crowds as they waved their palm branches and spread their cloaks and welcomed Jesus. They were still singing the praises that had excited them so much the day before. All three of these wonderful things meant the same thing: Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. All the wonderful things Jesus did were messages. They all said, “See! The one you’ve been waiting for is here!”

And the children understood that! Now, hosanna means “to save.” It was the traditional welcome cry for the promised Savior. The Son of David was the title for the King who had come to set God’s people free. That’s what these children shouted to Jesus, but they didn’t say those things on their own. The Holy Spirit was working that day to bring forth that faithful response. That’s not ironic. We expect God to work through his Word to change hearts and open mouths. The irony lay on the other side. Matthew writes, ***“But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ they were indignant.”***

The priests and the teachers of the law were the experts. They spent their days reading the Bible. They should have known better. However, when these things happened just like God promised they would in the Old Testament—when the Savior came—they didn’t recognize him. They were angry that other people were claiming he was the Messiah.

Simply, the children knew their Savior while the theologians didn’t. They praised him while the religious leaders’ hatred for Jesus and unbelief grew.

How wonderful...and at the same time, how sad.

Now, we could talk about so many in our world today, who are following in the footsteps of the chief priests and the teachers of the law...who see, just as much as we do, the love and kindness and wisdom and generosity of God, simply because the world turns and he provides so much for them each day and in so many wonderful ways.

Even better, God lays out the loving work of Jesus, the Savior of the world, in one of the most easily accessible books of all time, the Bible, and yet, so many, so very many refuse to see him and acknowledge him and praise him and believe in him.

It’s sad. And again, we could talk about them, but let’s talk about you and me, instead. Are we the priests, or are we the children?

Friends, Jesus and his saving work...it’s all laid out for us in Scripture. We’ve seen his love, his limitless love in our lives. And our response should be? Praise, right? Maybe not the “Hosanna, Son of David” we hear in these verses because Jesus has already come and secured the victory for us. But what about an “Alleluia! Praise Jesus for all the wonderful things he’s done!”? Our lives should be a constant string

of singing and sharing the praises of Jesus for everything he's done...everything he does for us day after day...like those children.

Is it, though? It's kind of unfair to ask right now because you're at church...it's Palm Sunday...Easter is right around the corner...of course you're excited and happy to sing Jesus' praises here and now. But what about the next day? Will the tunes of today still be on your lips and your minds and your hearts tomorrow?

Will you still be happy with Jesus when your boss or customer or teacher or student gets on you because they're not satisfied with your work?

Will praises for Jesus be on your lips when you're in an argument with your spouse or when the "traffic" is driving you mad or when you open up your next credit card bill or see how much you owe for taxes this year? Will praises for Jesus be the first thing on your lips when you get your next piece of good news?

Will you be excited to share Jesus with your unchurched neighbor and invite them to church for Easter, which is probably the lowest pressure service for a first-time guest to come to?

Not a whole lot of praise that often comes from us, or at least, not as much as there should be, is there? You know who we need to take a lesson from? The children. Not just the ones here.

Have you ever sat down to eat, and you're all ready to dig in, and your child says, "Aren't we going to pray first?" Have you ever been out grocery shopping, and your child starts singing loudly one of the Jesus songs they learned at Sunday School or that you've been singing with them at home? And you're quick to shush them because you're embarrassed. And maybe you should be embarrassed because they're willing to do what we so often aren't...selflessly and unashamedly praise and share Jesus.

How wonderful for them. How sad for us.

You know what? Simple Christians see Jesus with the faith of a child. They recognize the Savior who came to work wonders in our life and to give us peace. They know the only answer for the guilt we feel for our sin and for the hurt and sadness that sin causes in our lives is Jesus. The simple, humble Christian has no problem saying, "I have rebelled against God over and over again in my life."

God, give us such a faith as that! Move us to shout with those children, "***Hosanna to the Son of David!***", not as a song of praise, but as the cry for help that praise literally means, "Save us, our King...our Savior!"

And friends, he does. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to be our Savior. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the end of Jesus' life. Five days after the crowds of people welcomed him, some of those same people, perhaps, were chanting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Assuming that was the case, how's that for irony?

Jesus wanted that to happen. Jesus wanted the Romans to nail him to a cross. He wanted to hang there and be abandoned by God. Jesus wanted to die. Why? Because we have broken God's laws and his death was the only way to erase our record of sin. Unless Jesus hung on that cross and felt his Father's wrath, unless Jesus suffered an eternity of hell and punishment on Good Friday, all people on earth would be doomed to hell. So Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and on the next day, he healed the sick, cleansed his Father's house, and inspired the children to sing their song of praise so that untold

generations of Christians, like you and me, would see their Savior and trust that he has taken their place. He has paid for our sins. God has forgiven us. God has given us eternal life. My friends, do you hear what these children are saying? Understand these wonderful things! Praise Jesus for these wonderful things!

How can we do that? You know, when the Jewish leaders confronted Jesus, ***“Do you hear what these children as saying?”*** they were horrified these children would call Jesus the Messiah. They imagined that Jesus would be embarrassed enough to silence the children. But once again, they failed to understand. Jesus replied, ***“Yes...have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise’?”*** Jesus not only heard what they were saying, but he approved of it. This was exactly what God wanted to happen.

Now, in that psalm Jesus quoted, God taught his people that he treasured the praise of children because it comes from faith. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had taught only those who have the faith of a child would see the kingdom of heaven. Now he reminded his enemies, and us, it’s the faith of a child that brings forth the praise God is looking for.

God ordains praise from children’s lips. What does that mean? It’s God who causes things like that to come out of our children’s mouths. Through their baptisms and through the gospel message his children hear in church, God reaches into their hearts and fills them with joy in their Savior and confidence in his promises. And you know the faith of a child...how children take God at his word. When parents, Sunday school teachers and pastors teach children that God answers all our prayers and we should go to him when we need help, those children take our words to mean exactly what they say. They teach every one of us a lesson about limiting our trust to the things we think God will deal with.

Where can we adults get faith like little children? Only in one place—the gospel. The gospel comes to us in the Word and in the sacraments. The message that our Savior died and rose for us and that we are forgiven is the gospel. Every promise that Jesus works for us, that he helps us, and that he loves and cares for us is the gospel. Through that gospel alone, God changes our hearts and gives us faith in Jesus. And every time we hear that gospel message, God renews and strengthens that faith. And through that gospel comes a change in our lives. God calls forth our praise.

We praise God in all the ways we trust him. We praise God in all the times we turn to him and ask him to help us. We praise God when we lift up our voices and sing to our Savior who has loved us and changed us and made us his. We praise God in every way we serve him with our lives. My friends, praise him! Praise him because you are his. The beauty of this lesson is that God reminds us that he himself is the source of our praise. He ordains praise from our children and even from us adults. My friends, do you hear what these children are saying? Join them in their song of praise! Amen.