

“The Hopes and Fears of All the Years”
Matthew 21:1-11 and 27:14-56
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Preached March 16, 2008 at San José, Costa Rica

The events of Holy Week in Jerusalem are a long way from the little town of Bethlehem, but the words of the hymn we often sing on Christmas Eve may be truer for Holy Week than they are for that night of nights. You may remember how the first verse of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” concludes: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Were we to sing it again tonight, I might rewrite those words to read: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee this week,” for truly, nothing other than the whole sum of our hopes and fears are seen in the story during this week of weeks. If it is truer that our hopes and fears are met more fully during Holy Week, it is because of the public nature of both Jesus’ triumphal entry and his crucifixion, events open to the scrutiny of all the world instead of a just few frightened shepherds and some lowing cattle in the manger. It is the hymn writer’s interpretation of Christ’s birth that allows him to make his poetic, although very true, claim for the rest of us. It was the reality of those assembled in Jerusalem who witnessed the entry and death of Christ that brought forth both the palms and the tears that represented the hopes and fears of a people distant from us in years, but not certainly not in humanity.

The people who offered their palm branches and their praises are often criticized for having missed the point about Jesus. They are pilloried for being

hypocritical traitors who are as quick to crucify Jesus as to glorify him. But this, I think, can be forgiven them. They are just the crowd. They are the sheep who do only what the shepherd instructs. Indeed, we are told by Matthew that it was the chief priests and the elders who “*persuaded* the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.” Those who spread their cloaks and branches were not the theologians, nor the elites. No, these were the kind of people who were later dubbed by poet Emma Lazarus, in her words which grace the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” These were poor people, pulled to and fro by the constant war and political struggles that characterized the crossroads between the great powers of east, west, north, and south, the crossroads of Israel that was their homeland. Subject to excessive taxation, religious persecution, the Roman whim, and a religious system that had hardened in response to all it endured, the people who hailed Jesus as the conquering king were ready for a change, any change. They were ready to throw their hat in with anyone who could represent even a mild reprieve, if not an outright challenge. They didn’t have the luxury of an extended presidential primary season, or TV pundits explaining the pros and cons of various legislative approaches to their situation. They had only their hopes for a better future, the same hopes every parent has looking upon their bundle of joy, that every starry-eyed child has looking upon his or her first hero, that once in a great while springs to life renewed in the heart of each of us in the

midst of the daily grind. They had the kind of hope that provoked a young girl to respond to Newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer's call for donations from New York's poor to complete the pedestal of that same Statue of Liberty, the hope that was found in her letter to Pulitzer's newspaper, "The World": "I am a young girl alone in the world, and earning my own living. Enclosed please find 60 cents, the result of self-denial. I wish I could make it 60 thousand dollars, instead of cents, but drops make the ocean."

Drops make the ocean. In a world in which it took perhaps a thousand palm fronds to put a roof on a house, those that were laid at Jesus feet were almost as valuable as the hopes they represented. Those who gathered that day can be said to have "put their money where the mouth is" by taking what could have been used to improve their lives and using it to express their desire for an even bigger improvement. I don't mean to romanticize those who laid down their palms, but the truth is that while it may have been but one frond, it was a sacrifice of the same order as the girl whose 60 cents represented a drop in the ocean. There is no shame in having hopes, and expressing those hopes given the opportunity, even if it seems extravagant. Indeed, it was precisely to realize those hopes that Christ came and lived and died, perhaps not to realize them using the methods everyone expected or to realize those at odds with the kingdom, but to realize the earnest and honest hopes of a people who had depended on the promises of the shalom of God, a thing promised even from the garden. And so let us not be so quick to criticize the crowd

that day, for when we can no longer wear our kingdom hopes on our sleeves, knowing God desires for them to be realized, we will truly have fallen into a pit of despair so deep that we might wonder if not even the outstretched hand of God could reach us.

It was in such a pit of despair that the same crowd found itself just a few days later, the hopes that had buoyed them becoming fears that held them down. We really only hear about the disciples and their response to the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, but we must believe that there were many others whose fears began to loom larger than ever upon seeing their friend and potential liberator raised up on Calvary. This is of course, precisely what those who opposed Jesus had in mind, to realize the fears of those who might cause trouble so that they might back down and relieve the pressure that was building for change. Remember that those who felt the most threatened by Jesus were not the Romans and their leaders, but the leaders of Jesus' own people, leaders who had plenty at stake should the crowd that exalted Jesus decide to turn its cries of acclaim for Jesus into battle cries against the Romans. It is the very goal and purpose of fearmongering to raise the level of anxiety to a level so paralyzing that nothing can change. Will things get worse for us? Will the sins of the parents be revisited on the children to the third and fourth generation? Will things ever change? "The one who comes in the name of the Lord" has gone the way of other false hopes. What will we do now?

The people for whom Jesus lived and died met their hopes at the gates of Jerusalem and their fears at Golgotha. We, of course, have the luxury of looking ahead to Easter and knowing that our hopes are not in vain, even if they won't be realized according to our timetable and our methods. But those in Jesus' time had no such luxury. They had only the highs and the lows of that week, a place where many of us spend many a week. I was in a meeting this week with members of a church in conflict, a church which a few short years ago was full of hope and promise and now is rife with fear and despair. And one of the women at this meeting asked, "How can this have happened when just a little while ago our former pastor taught us so well not to do this?" Actually, the way she put it was not quite so kind, and not in the first person plural of "we," but rather it was directed at "those people," at her opponents in the conflict. And while she really should have offered it as a "we" statement, I think this can be forgiven her, just as I want to give the benefit of the doubt to the crowd in Jerusalem. You see, if Christ could condemn "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" for having hopes and being overwhelmed by fear, our God is not as full of grace as we have been led to believe. The last time I checked, we were only human, and it is this humanity for which Christ came, to redeem it from unfulfilled hopes and irrational fears, and little by little we get there with a few setbacks along on the way, but all the time moving ahead in faith to the new Jerusalem, *si Dios quiere*, God willing.

It is not evident in the passages read tonight, of course, that God does not leave hopes unfulfilled nor leave us in a place of paralyzing fear. The victory story comes later. We do know, however, that God didn't hold the highs and lows of that Holy Week in Jerusalem against those who hoped and feared, especially those like the disciples who probably should have known better, and we know that neither does God hold them against us this Holy Week. This is why I want to encourage you during Holy Week 2008 to live it fully, with all its highs and lows, laying down your hopes at Jesus' feet like so many palm branches, and raising up your voice to God with your fears. Read the stories and exercise your hopes. Hear the stories and acknowledge your fears. Live the stories and weep this week with the same joy and sorrow that your ancestors in the faith felt that week. From our hosannas to our heartbreaks, God meets us where we are, even as the hopes and fears of all our years are met in him this week. And that we may begin our Holy Week just where the disciples did, let me invite you to take a few moments and think about a hope or two. And when you have found that hope which is the palm branch in your hand this night, bring it forward and lay it at the foot of the cross. These will not be wishes, my friends, but hopes that we believe God can and will realize, just as the hopes of Jerusalem were realized through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And when we have returned to our seats, we will say together the responsive prayer found in the bulletin. Let us come, bringing our hopes, and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Come.