

Save Us!

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Palm Sunday
April 2, 2023

Scripture

Matthew 21:1-17

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself'?" He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Sermon

On Monday, April 4, 1865, three Union steamers, the *U.S.S. Malvern*, the *River Queen*, and the *Bat*, the transport *Columbus*, a tug, five all together, made the treacherous journey up the James River toward Richmond. The abandoned Confederate forts along the James were still smoldering. The river was full of broken artillery and dead horses. They encountered a boat that missed the narrow river channel and ran aground, meaning the river was impassable for the *Malvern* and soon, the other vessels, except the tug. Then the tug was needed to rescue a party in a small steamer caught and held by the current south of town. And so, a small Union contingent was transferred to a barge that made its way to Richmond, a city in chaos. General Lee advised Jefferson Davis to evacuate the Confederate government and army on April 2. Before leaving, tobacco warehouses were set ablaze and the air was thick with smoke and ash. The Union barge eventually docked at Rockets Landing. Off walked twenty-four marines escorting their precious cargo: President Abraham Lincoln. The marine contingent that was supposed to meet him was late. The naval vessels left behind on the James, filled with marines, and flags flying at every masthead, were going to fire a national salute and then arrive in this

conquered city, triumphant. Instead, Lincoln arrived on a solitary barge with twenty-four marines. Lincoln told Admiral Porter, who was on the barge, "Tis well to be humble." [1] When they arrived, the streets were desolate. And so they began the long walk into town.

There was a welcome party, though, on the way. Along the shoreline were hundreds of formerly enslaved black men, women, and children who somehow knew Lincoln was on his way. There was wild excitement and yelling. "Here comes Massa Lincoln, Savior of the land." They made their way to him. Soon, hundreds of black hands were outstretched to Lincoln. He shook some of their hands and thanked them for their welcome. There was a sixty-year-old black man, tall, gaunt, with a sad face, as if bearing all the grief of the nation, who couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Lincoln approaching. "Bless the Lord," he said. "Here is the great Messiah! I knew him as soon as I saw him. He's been in my [mind] for long years, and he's come at last to free his children from their bondage. Glory, hallelujah!" He fell on his knees before the President and kissed his feet. The others followed his example, and in a minute, an eyewitness recounts, "Mr. Lincoln was surrounded by these people, who had treasured up the recollection of him caught from a photograph and had looked up to him for four years as the one who was to lead them out of captivity."

Lincoln looked down at his feet, embarrassed. "Don't kneel to me," he said. "That is not right. You must kneel to God only, and thank him for the liberty you will hereafter enjoy. I am but God's humble instrument; but you may rest assured that as long as I live no one shall put a shackle on your limbs, and you shall have all the rights which God has given to every other free citizen of this Republic." Eyewitnesses said that Lincoln's "face was lit up with a divine look as he uttered these words. Though not a handsome man, and ungainly in his person, yet in his enthusiasm he seemed the personification of beauty, and that sad face of his looked down in kindness...with a grace that could not be excelled. He seemed of another world."

Then the crowds of free blacks joined hands and formed a ring and sang a hymn that filled the streets. This is what they sang: "Oh, all ye people clap your hands,/ And with triumphant voices sing;/ No force the mighty power withstands,/ Of God, the universal King."

Lincoln then made his way through the streets to the home of Jefferson Davis and sat in his desk chair. On April 9, Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Court House, the day before Palm Sunday that year. On April 14, Maundy Thursday, Lincoln was shot at Ford's Theatre in DC and died the next morning on Good Friday.

The story of Lincoln's arrival to a conquered city, the image of him humbly arriving without pomp and ceremony, surrounded by crowds of formerly enslaved blacks offering thanks and praise to God and Lincoln for saving them from the shackles of slavery, has taken up a lot of space in my head and heart this week. There's something about the juxtaposition of Jesus arriving humbly in Jerusalem and Lincoln arriving humbly in Richmond in rubble and ashes to a crowd that knows what it's like to suffer at the hands of oppression and to experience freedom—and to think that all this happened so close to Holy Week in 1865. I'm not saying Lincoln was a Messiah, of course. However, the parallels between Christ and Lincoln grew upon Lincoln's death, on Good Friday, as the one who sacrificed to save and preserve the Union. I think there was something Christ-like in how he tried to live his life. [2] Lincoln was, in fact, reluctant to visit Richmond so soon because he didn't want to be seen as a gloating conquering emperor. This nation would be a very different place today had his vision for Reconstruction been shared by the next Administration and Congress.

"Here comes the Savior of the land." According to Matthew, that, in effect, is what the crowds shouted as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Hosanna! These days, "Hosanna!" has become a

word of praise and celebration. Hurray! Or, as the British say, "Huzzah." Palm Sunday has become a day celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry into the city. This triumphalism is found in the hymns we sing every year. I'm not sure, however, the Gospels are that triumphalist. The crowds aren't saying, "Hurray for Jesus!" These aren't "sweet hosannas," as we sang earlier. The crowds are crying out, "Save us, Lord. Deliver us." Originally, in Hebrew, *hosanna* was an invocation. It was a petition meaning, "Help!" or "Save!" or "Save now!" or "Rescue!" We hear it in Psalm 118:25, "Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success." Followed by "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD" (Ps. 118:26). Hosanna is a cry for divine deliverance, for liberation. Save us! It has morphed into adoration and praise, but it's really "Save us!"

"Hosanna to the Son of David" (Mt. 21:15). Save us Son of David. They are shouting politically-charged theological claims about Jesus—even the *children* are doing this!—near and in the Temple precincts. [3] The religious leaders asked Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" (Mt. 21:16). Who was David? The king of the Jews! Right? And who was the King of the Jews at the time of Jesus? *Tiberius Caesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus*. Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus. Emperor, Caesar Tiberius (42 BC – 37 AD) is king.

The imperial might of Rome conquered Palestine in 63 BC and oppressed the nation. And in Matthew's Gospel, the Romans are always in the shadows, watching over everything. Every year extra legions were brought up from Caesarea Philippi, along the coast, to Jerusalem, because during Passover, Jerusalem was a powder keg waiting to explode. The legions were stationed in the Antonia Fortress, built by Herod the Great (37-4 BC), next to and above the Temple so that from its towers, they could watch over what was going on down in the Temple precincts. They were there to keep the peace, to watch for days like this one: when a radical rabbi orchestrates a demonstration, gets the entire city stirred up, overturns the economy of the Temple (which profited Rome), and claims the Temple itself, as his personal house of prayer! Matthew interjects into his account these words from Zechariah, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look your *king* is coming to you" (9:9), a politically charged claim, which should get our attention.

The religious and political authorities were not the ones rejoicing the day when love came to town. They were not with the people in the streets; they were not in the crowds shouting hosannas, happy to see Jesus saying, "Save us." Those in power, the dominant culture, those with authority, privilege, and financial means, and all those who lived comfortable, undisturbed lives with no theological qualms about being part of an empire were not glad to see Jesus. Empire, then and now, is never happy when Jesus shows up. The empire never thinks it needs saving. Jesus came to save all those oppressed by the empire, the economically impoverished, scared, weighed down by the force of Roman power. And Jesus also came to save the empire. And Jesus showed us that the way God saves is not like the Romans with brute force or through political *coup d'etats* or insurrections, but through the strong force of love and mercy, suffering love, a love that suffers for us but also suffers so that we might see in him on a cross what we are doing to ourselves and to one another when love and mercy are missing from our lives.

Despite the confessions we will make next Sunday on Easter—"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"—we all know that we have yet to fully live into God's vision of love and mercy for us. There's much in our lives that still needs saving. This has been a challenging, unsettling week for us as a nation. Yet another shooting, this time at a Presbyterian Church school in Nashville. The daughter of the school's chaplain was among those killed. There were images of teenagers being arrested in Nashville demanding that they have safe schools. They were

essentially saying, "Save us." "Please save us." The shooter in Nashville struggled with mental health issues and was struggling with painful grief this past year. No excuse, to be sure. But she, too, needed "saving." The trans community was particularly vulnerable this week in Nashville and elsewhere. In North Dakota, teenagers were arrested for the restrictive anti-trans legislation being debated. They, too, are looking for safety. "Save us." The litany of issues and challenges facing us these days are enormous, at times, overwhelming. The division in this nation is growing, and with the indictment of a former president, we are in uncharted waters. Who knows what this coming week will bring. Rapid climate change, terrifying weather events, there are wars and rumors of war. Lincoln said during the Civil War, "The occasion is piled high with difficulties, and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew." [4]

As we make our way with Jesus through the city and the events of Holy Week, it might be good to remember that the cries of the crowd, "Save us!" are as much our cries today. We, too, need saving. But we know what the crowds did not know that day. Love alone is triumphant. The Prince of Peace still rides defiant, as we sang earlier, liberating God's people, releasing us from our shackles, saving, still, through compassion. A "love unknown" and strange, yet strong and good and rich in mercy. [5]



Image: Jyoti Sahi (Indian, 1944–), *Entry into Jerusalem*, 2012.

Sources

- [1] All the quotations are taken from eyewitness accounts found here, "Entering Richmond," www.mrlincolnanfreedom.org/civil-war/black-soldiers/entering-richmond/.
- [2] On Lincoln's evolving faith during the Civil War see Ronald C. White, Jr. *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (Random House, 2009) and *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (Simon and Schuster, 2002).

- [3] Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of the Teachings of Jesus and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 114, 112.
- [4] From Lincoln's Annual Address to Congress, December 1, 1862. "The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."
- [5] Allusion to two hymns sung in worship. "O Save Us, Lord! Hosanna!" Text by Christ Shelton (b.1978), written shortly after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. "And there in every protest, till weapons kill no more, still rides defiant Jesus, just as he rode before." And "My Song Is Love Unknown." Text by Samuel Crossmann (1623-1683), with a tune written by John Ireland (1979-1962) in 1918.