

April 10, Palm Sunday C (Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40)

## **Even if we think we don't need a savior, we seek one.**

by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [March 23, 2022](#) issue

High on a shelf in my office perches an icon I received as a gift. A friend purchased it in Greece and had my name inscribed on the back by the icon writer, Father Pefkis of Agion Oros, Athos. It is of the Cretan School, written in the Byzantine style. Just off-center in the foreground is Jesus on the back of a white colt. His usual robe of blue over a red tunic is here a verdant green over a burnished orange. The green is echoed in the dome of the Jerusalem temple inside the walled city, itself depicted in the style of a Byzantine church. The green and orange repeat in the garments of the crowd that follows Jesus down the mountain on one side and the one who greets him outside the city gates on the other.

The green emanates from a palm tree rising just behind the colt's mane. In the tree is a small man reminiscent of Zacchaeus. He cuts branches with a scythe. In the foreground, children take off their cloaks and lay them on the ground before the colt's hooves. A craggy Mount of Olives gleams in a golden hue.

The icon is full of motion, from the turning heads of those glimpsing Jesus to the cutting and falling of the palms, the slow canter of the colt, the procession of the crowd, and the haste of the children who throw their cloaks to the ground. Beholding the icon one can almost hear the cry of Psalm 118: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

When I received the icon many years ago, I had no such detailed appreciation for it. I confess to a miffed and greedy confusion. Of all the icons I might have coveted, of saints or apostles or Gospel stories, Palm Sunday? It is possible the giver saw a gap in my piety that I did not. The icon has spoken to me these many years, inviting me deeper into the Gospel story. Palm Sunday has become one of the most anticipated observances of the Christian year for me.

At the congregation I served until recently, it was celebrated with a liturgical restraint approaching embarrassment. Still, I looked forward to the opening processional around the block, which garnered the notice of the Sunday morning cyclists and joggers and sometimes the pique of the dog walkers. I enjoyed publicly proclaiming “Hosanna!” With tears swelling I would ascend the sanctuary steps, doors thrown open as we heard the mighty organ strains of “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” By the time I reached the pulpit I was ready for the last stanza: “As you received their praises, / Receive our prayers today, / Whose justice and whose mercy / And sovereignty hold sway.”

In Luke’s telling of Palm Sunday, Jesus instructs the disciples to find the colt, saying to tell anyone who asks that “the Lord needs it.” What Jesus instructs, the disciples do, so we hear the refrain “the Lord needs it” a second time. Jesus needs the colt for himself. He knows we need to praise him for our sake, not his. As Isaiah told us last week, we are a people formed for God’s praise.

The praise resounds as Jesus descends the Mount of Olives. Despite the demands of the elders at the gate, he will not order his disciples to stop. Jesus will not silence us as we call him Lord and hail him as king.

The denomination in which I was raised and now serve was a merger of Protestants whose foundational confessional statement is that we acknowledge Jesus, Son of God, and Savior, as the sole head of the church. This statement, like the Palm Sunday procession, is met with restraint approaching embarrassment in some sectors of my denomination. But even if we eschew the biblical language of lord and savior and king, we choose one. Even if we think we don’t need a savior, we seek one.

“We have no king but the emperor,” the crowd says to Pilate in John 19:15. That phrase should haunt us. It echoes forth from first-century Jerusalem to 21st-century Washington, DC. If we don’t choose to praise God, we will choose another who is terribly unworthy of our praise. To shout “Hosanna,” to declare “blessed is the one,” to proclaim “Jesus is Lord, Son of God, and Savior,” to sing to our redeemer king—this is to declare all earthly powers penultimate, empty of the power to silence our praise or steal our allegiance.

Perhaps this is what I am feeling on Palm Sunday. Singing those sweet hosannas comes as sweet relief. It is freedom from the misdirected praise I know I give my idols. The relief is in knowing that I can soon confess that idolatry on Maundy

Thursday and Good Friday—and that I am yearly and always forgiven my confusion and betrayal and misplaced loyalty to a lesser king. Acclaiming that God's justice and mercy and sovereignty hold sway builds up my belief and resolve. On Palm Sunday I know that for me there is no king but Jesus, who has already claimed me. So then I am free to proclaim with the Gospel reading, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"