

April 1, 2007
Luke 19:28-40

Sermon: "Praise Happens!"

Rev. Bob Jack

Text: "*If these [disciples] were silent, the very stones would cry out!*"

As many of you know, my father is from Scotland. He still speaks with a distinct accent – a “burr” – although it has been moderated by over fifty years of living in America. When I was just a boy I found it fascinating that my dad spoke so much differently from all the other dads. And I’ll admit, there were times when I just couldn’t understand him – usually in those times when he was pretty hot, when I had misbehaved and was getting a scolding from him, and he’d be fussing and fuming in what seemed like a foreign language.

One of the words my father used a lot when he got mad at us was ‘*struth!*’ He would say such things as, “‘*Struth*, son, if you don’t clean up your room I’ll have tae take away your allowance!” Or, “‘*Struth*, it’s a hot day today!”

It wasn’t until I got to college, and started taking English literature classes, that I finally understood my father was using a

common interjection or expletive, at least for people in the British Isles. '*Struth!*' was simply a contraction of the two words *God's truth!*

Many of the expletives and interjections we use in everyday speech derive from oaths that are taken in God's name, and that means we should really try to avoid using them. But this is difficult because they're everywhere, and we've just come to accept them as normal habits of speaking. How about "*O My God!*"? Most people don't even realize they're using it, but it's taking the Lord's name in vain.

Then there's "*Gosh darn it!*" Or, the Southern equivalent, "*Dad-gum it!*" or, "*Goll-darn it!*" I won't tell you what those expressions really mean, (I think you can guess), but they *really* take the Lord's name in vain, and it ain't pretty. My point in all this is to say that common expressions we mutter in the grocery store or to a sneezing friend once were very godly phrases. But today they've become simply expressions of cultural convention, forms of habit. We use them because everyone's using them.

It's been said of some devout Jews that when they pray the prayer "Lord, have mercy," they say the words "have mercy" as fast as they can after they say "Lord," because they're afraid that God in all his terrible fury just might appear before they've ask for his mercy.

And in our culture, too: People don't say "Lord, have mercy." What do they say? "*Lawd-a-mehcy!*" "*Lawd-a-mehcy, these prices just keep goin' up and out-a-sight!*" "*Lawd-a-mehcy, for such an ugly old coot he sho' 'nuff got himself a good-lookin' wife!*" Nobody expects to be able to summon the actual presence of God, or God's mercy. It's just a saying. Just a saying.

The *Lawd-a-mehcy* of Jesus day was something taken from the 118th Psalm, and it's repeated in the story I just read from the Gospel of Luke: "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" This phrase was originally part of the worship service for when a king came back from battle, having won a victory. The king would go to the temple to give thanks for his victory, and the

priests would say, *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.”*

But by the time of Jesus, this phrase had become the standard greeting for all the pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for a festival. As they streamed into the city, people on the sidewalks would say to them, *“Blessed are you who come in the name of the Lord.”* It was pretty much the same as saying, “Welcome to Jerusalem; have a nice day.”

So when Luke tells us that the crowds heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem and went out to meet him, shouting *“Blesses is he who comes in the name of the Lord,”* you can bet that he wasn’t the only person they were saying that to. Pilgrims from all over the world were streaming into the city – from Rome and Greece and modern-day Turkey, and North Africa, and you name it!

And maybe, as the crowds were hailing Jesus with those familiar words, maybe another family from the other side of the

world was there, hearing the same words coming from the mouths of the crowds: *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”*

It was just the thing to say. No one really expected anything different. Just another tourist coming to town. Just another pilgrim in the holy land.

And if you really want to know what the crowd was expecting on that day when they greeted Jesus, a better indication of their feelings is found in the palm branches they were waving. The palm branches they were waving in front of Jesus were kind of like the American flags we wave at parades today – especially the increased number of flags that were waved right after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. It was a patriotic symbol of hope that this Jesus fellow, this young rabbi from Galilee, who had stirred up so much attention, that he might strike a blow for freedom, a blow against the Romans.

So, here you’ve got a picture of the crowds doing two things: first, they’re shouting a ceremonial greeting and, second, they’re waving patriotic symbols of freedom. The one was nothing more

than an expletive – something you muttered because it filled an empty space and everybody was saying it. But the palm branches were a different thing altogether. That was something the people wanted to do because it made them feel better about themselves. They were looking for someone, some warrior, to swoop down into Jerusalem and whoop-up on the Romans. That's what they wanted.

The Rolling Stones used to sing “You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you jus' might find, you get what you need.” And I think that's what the people of Jerusalem discovered on that day when Jesus came to town for the Passover. They didn't exactly get what they wanted, but they did get what they needed. In fact, it's just what we all need.

Much to their disappointment, Jesus didn't turn out to be the revolutionary freedom-fighter-slash-war-hero they were looking for. He didn't come swooping down from on high or galloping in on a battle steed, guns a-blazing, ready to whoop-up on the Romans. Instead, he road into town on a donkey, humble and lowly and unassuming. And the palm branches they were waving?

Well, so much for national power and pride. And it turns out, the words they shouted – “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” – well, turns out they couldn’t have been more right-on, and on target. That was the truth after all. That was the truth that they all desperately needed. God was indeed with them. He was with them in Jesus.

And it happens to you and me, too, you know. When we least expect it, when we think that our prayers are never going to be answered, they are. When we least expect God to be present, he is! And when we least expect “it”, “it” happens. Like those crowds, you may walk week after week through worship, saying the prayers, singing the hymns, beckoning God to come and be with you. “Come, Lord Jesus!” you pray. And nothing seems to happen.

But then, just as on that day long ago in Jerusalem, Jesus walks into your life. You may not even recognize it, at first. You were looking for something else. But nothing else will do. Nothing and no one else can take the place of Jesus in your life. Jesus

entered the lives of those people in Jerusalem way back when – and he wants to enter your life today. What do you say?

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“The peace of Christ be with you!”

“Lord, have mercy!”

“Come, Lord Jesus!”

We say these things all the time in our pilgrim journey, especially when we come to church. And we hardly know what we’re saying, most of the time. We certainly don’t expect much to happen when we do say these things. We’re just so used to it. They’re words we use just to fill the spaces of worship.

But then, when we least expect it, coming down the road of our life we see the one that we’ve been hungering and thirsting for all our lives. We see Jesus. And we put down our palm branches, and our expectations that are too small and too misguided and self-centered, and we shout with all joy, *“Hallelujah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”*

Praise happens! Yes it does. Yes it does. Hallelujah!