

# Matthew 21:12-17

Lent 6, Palm Sunday, Ironies of the Passion, March 20, 2016

Theme: Do you hear what these children are saying?

INJ A pastor with a large family tells about a hectic Sunday morning. His son couldn't find his belt. They looked all over. The pastor was getting frustrated as the clock kept running and he was going to be late for church. Then his son, who was eight, asked a simple question: "Dad, have you asked God for help?" That question knocked the wind right out of the pastor's sails. Who had spent the last eight years teaching his son to pray when he was in need? Who remembered to apply the lesson?

In our midweek Lenten services, we considered the ironies of the passion. Irony is an outcome that is the opposite of what you expect. You don't expect a child to take a pastor to school on such a basic matter of faith. But that's what the Scriptures say about children and their faith. This Palm Sunday we consider the incident that inspired the stirring hymn we just sang, "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna." We want to see the irony in the question Jesus' enemies asked: Do you hear what these children are saying?

In our lesson Matthew writes, "But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things [Jesus] did ..." "Wonderful!" means "really good!" right? That's true. However, the word Matthew uses 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.

What things were so wonderful? The triumphal entry into Jerusalem certainly caused people to sit up and wonder, but this incident actually happened the next day. On Monday of Holy Week, Jesus went to the temple and did wonderful things seen by the religious leaders.

In the temple Jesus found money changers and merchants. This was the week of Passover. God's law required every Jewish male to come to Jerusalem for the festival. They came from all over the Roman world, and they had to purchase a lamb for the Passover meal. They could buy one at the temple. However, the priests insisted on being paid in Jewish shekels rather than in any other currency. That way they could manipulate the exchange rates and overcharge for the lambs. It was like buying a hot dog at a football game. It costs a lot more there than it does at the grocery store.

Jesus took action. He drove out the money changers and those selling livestock, and he called them thieves. That was the first wonderful thing — the first amazing thing — Jesus 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." Jesus had been healing people for three years. Yet here he did it one last time, at the end of his ministry, showing his divine authority.

Jesus did a third wonderful thing that day. He called forth a response of faith. Children shouted in the temple courts, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" They had marched the day before with the crowds that waved their palm branches and spread their cloaks and welcomed Jesus. They were still singing the praises that had excited them the day before.

All three of these wonderful things meant the same thing: Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus was sending a message to the people: "The one God promised, for whom you have been waiting, the Savior, is here!"

The children believed the message that Jesus is the Savior. Hosanna means "to save." It was the traditional welcome cry for the promised Messiah. "The Son of David" was a title for the King who was coming to set God's people free. When the children shouted "Hosanna" to Jesus, they didn't say it on their own. The Holy Spirit was working in them to bring forth the fruits of faith.

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 and teaching the Bible. Yet, when these things happened as God promised they would — when the Savior came — they did not trust him. They were angry that others claimed Jesus was the Messiah. Children knew their Savior while the theologians didn't. That is ironic, isn't it?

It is no different today. Pointy-headed intellectuals smirk at foolish people like us who need to believe in a God. People who don't trust Jesus think we are stupid. A sad reality of the modern Christian church is that many pastors and professors do not even believe in Jesus anymore — at least not the way these children did. They don't accept a Savior who died and rose again. They don't claim that God came in the flesh to pay for sins. They deny that God prophesied in the Old Testament that this Savior would appear. That's sad, because God lays it all out clearly in his Word.

It is surprising irony that people will believe almost anything. Aliens from outer space infiltrated our society — Could be. God talks to us through our feelings — Why not? God coming in the flesh to pay for sins with his own blood so that sinners won't go to hell — well, not that!

Why not? Because that would mean God is a judge. If there is an absolute standard of right and wrong, everyone must submit to it or suffer the consequences. People in our society do not buy that. Our sinful natures have a hard time with it, too. We think right and wrong really mean what's best for me. When God sets eternal standards and absolute rules — that means that I am wrong. It proves that I am guilty and that I deserve to suffer in hell forever. My sinful nature doesn't like that kind of talk!

Simple Christians with their new nature see Jesus with the faith of a child. We recognize the Savior who came to give us peace. We know the only answer for the guilt we feel over our sin and for the hurt and sadness that sin causes in our lives is Jesus. Yes, that does mean that there is absolute right and wrong. Sin is rebellion against God. The simple, humble Christian practices saying, "I have rebelled against God again in my life."

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 with shouts of "Hosanna," crowds chanted "Crucify him! Crucify him!" How is that for unexpected irony?

Jesus wanted that irony 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 absolute laws. Jesus' death was the only way to erase our record of sin. Unless Jesus hung on the 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 on Palm Sunday, and on the next day he drove the money changers out of the temple, healed the sick, and inspired the children to sing their song of praise, "Hosanna." He did it all so that untold generations of Christians would see their Savior and trust that he has taken their place under sin's curse. He has paid for your sins. God has forgiven you. You have eternal life. My friends, do you hear what these children are saying? Jesus wants you to understand these wonderful things!

"Do you hear what they're saying?" That question often means someone is in trouble. People tend to like their NFL football team, especially in Wisconsin. One of my pastor friends, who is not a Packers fan, visited family in that state. While the adults were visiting, his children taught their younger niece to say, "Go Bears!" She ran around the house loudly proclaiming "Go Bears!" while the rest of the children rolled on the floor laughing. When the adults caught on to what was happening, can you hear the Packer parents saying "Do you hear what that child is saying?" They weren't happy about it! That formulaic question is almost always a rebuke.

That's what it was when the Jewish leaders confronted Jesus. "Do

you hear what these children are saying?" The leaders were horrified that Jewish children would call Jesus the Messiah. They thought Jesus would be embarrassed enough to silence the children. Once again, they failed to understand. Jesus replied, "Yes, have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have ordained praise'?" Jesus not only heard what the children were saying, but he also approved of it. God wants children to praise him.

Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2. That psalm is all about how God the Son would leave his throne of glory and live here, humbly, in our place. In that psalm, God taught his people that he treasured the praise of children because it comes from faith. Jewish people in Jesus' day recognized that Psalm 8 is a prophecy about the coming Savior, so when Jesus quoted it, he left his enemies sputtering. They didn't know what to say.

God ordains praise from children's lips. Going back to that pastor and his son and the prayer about the belt, God causes amazing things to come out of our children's mouths. Through baptism and through the gospel message they hear in church, in Lutheran Elementary and Sunday School, and at home, God reaches into the hearts of children and fills them with faith and joy in their Savior. God moves them to praise his name.

We shouldn't be surprised that faith-filled words come from a child. Adults often poison faith with reason. We limit faith by our assumptions: "God isn't going to get involved in something so trivial as a belt." Children take God at his word. When parents, Sunday School teachers, Lutheran Elementary School teachers, and pastors teach children that God answers all our prayers and that we should go to him when we need help, those children take our words to mean exactly what they say. They teach us a lesson about trusting Jesus with our whole heart.

Where can adults get faith like little children? The same place children get it. 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. From that gospel comes first a change in our hearts. God gives us faith. Then, every time we hear that gospel message, God renews and strengthens our faith. Through that gospel comes a change in our lives, too. God calls forth our praise.

We praise God by trusting his promises. 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 so loved us. We praise God in every way we serve him with our lives. Do you hear what these children are saying? We join them in their song of praise! SDG Amen.