

Hands of Praise

Mark 11:1-10 (NIV)

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.' " ⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" ¹⁰ "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When you hear the word "praise," what comes to mind? It's something audible, something verbal, right? Maybe it's a positive word, maybe even a song or a hymn, about someone declaring that this person is special or has accomplished something noteworthy and good. We do praise here at church, especially on Palm Sunday.

There were great shouts of praise when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt, the foal of a donkey. "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (verses 9-10) That call of "Hosanna," is a phrase that literally means, "Please, Lord, save us!" They're calling out to Jesus as the promised one who was descended from David's royal line, the one who comes in the name of the Lord according to the prophecies, one who comes from God to save them – whether it be from political or spiritual unrest. The Jews were praising Jesus.

We too are praising God using the same shouts and waving palm branches of our own, laying them down at the altar reminiscent of what the crowds did that day. We praise Jesus as the conquering King with our hymns because we know how the rest of the story plays out. We know that he's riding into Jerusalem to die, to sacrifice his life on the cross to draw all people to himself, to make us a part of his kingdom, to save us from our sins so that we dwell with him forever in heaven.

We praise him not just here with our lips, but also as we take the message of our conquering Savior King to others. We praise him by inviting our family, our friends, our neighbors to come and hear what the Savior of the world did for them and for us. We praise God when we read Bible stories with our family, when we pray together, when we talk about our faith in God, and teach our kids how he saves us and them. There are opportunities to praise God with our lips all the time!

But do we don't only praise God with our lips. There was an inaudible way that two of Jesus' disciples praised him that day. Jesus commanded them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" (verses 2-3) There was not a word spoken or a song sung in response. They simply obeyed and did what Jesus said.

Do we praise God with the same unspoken obedience or is our obedience and faithfulness to his Word more conditional? If Jesus had commanded us to go get a colt that we didn't own, would we have questioned him? Would we have asked, "Hey, how will we know which one to pick? What if the owner says, 'no'? What if we are accused of stealing?" Do we question God now when he says that he will work all things to our good and we ask, "How? Show me. Show me the details before I believe you and keep going on."? What has God commanded us that we have put it off, saying that we would do it later, but then conveniently forgetting to do it? Is it caring for my spouse, my kids, doing that project at work? Do we ignore God's direction in his Word, pretend as if we didn't hear it, or decided, "It's not my job. Someone else can do it."? Do we think that when we hear God say to his followers, "Go and make disciples of all nations"?

When we listen to God and do what he tells us, we use hands of praise instead of just our lips. We praise God when we take him at his Word, even when it's hard to believe, even when we don't want to. We praise him with immediate obedience, even when we have questions and uncertainties. And we know that we are often quick to object, quick to put it off for another day, quick to forget what he has commanded us. Father, forgive us when we don't use our hands to praise you by doing what you say.

After the disciples brought the colt to Jesus, we saw another way that the people praised God with their hands. "When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields." (verses 7-8) The giving of the colt, the putting their cloaks on the donkey as a saddle for his

comfort, the laying their cloaks on the road like putting your coat on a puddle so that someone didn't have to step in it, the cutting and spreading palm branches like rolling out a red carpet for this conquering King – these were all ways that the people were praising God with their hands.

These hands of praise on Palm Sunday remind me a bit of a hat trick in hockey. When a single player scores three goals in one game, it's tradition that people throw their hats on to the ice rink to praise the accomplishment. I've always wondered what happens to those hats afterwards. Although some hockey rinks will collect all the hats and set up an elaborate lost and found for people to reclaim them, often they don't get their hats back because the player is keeping them, the stadium is donating them or putting them on display. How many of the cloaks strewn on that road to Jerusalem actually got back to their original owners? How many made a point of going back vs. how many were thrilled to be giving up their cloaks as they saw this prophecy from Zechariah fulfilled, that their Savior was coming to town, that they didn't think twice about retrieving their cloak because it was used to praise God?! They were happy to give it, expending the cost of a cloak to worship their God who would save them?

Would we have been so generous as to give up our cloak, our coats, for a Jesus parade? Would we have been stingy, scoffed at this massive waste of cloaks saying that they could have been used so much better for a different cause, like providing clothes for the poor instead of laying on the dirt covered roads? Are our hands praising God by giving freely in honor of him or are our hearts stingy, that we only give him of what we have as an after thought of when I have come up with the most frugal and cost-effective way to give God of my earthly riches, that I can't be extravagant when it comes to praising my God? Do we shake our heads at the idea of spending \$2,000 so that we can send postcards to people to know our Savior when some people are just going to throw that away? Do we brush off the idea of spending money on items used in worship because what we have is fine, we don't need anything better or nicer? Do we tell ourselves that it's good and right stewardship to praise God cheaply as a cover for the attitude of my heart that actually wants to save the extravagance for myself or simply that we don't think God is worth it?

Our hands can give so much extravagant and costly praise to God with what we do with them. I'm not just talking about your financial wealth. You can certainly extravagantly praise God by giving of your riches so that his Word may be spread in order that more people can know him as their Savior. But our hands also praise the Lord when we use them to take care of things and help others out here at church – everything from the hands that fold and staple worship folders, to setting up the elements for the Lord's Supper, to lighting the candles, to playing an instrument, to patching holes in walls, touching them up the paint, to pulling weeds, mowing the lawn, removing snow, serving on committees and councils. We use our hands of praise by greeting people that you don't know, by being warm and welcoming to them, introducing yourself, taking an interest in them as a person, getting to know them, showing love to them rather than a passing interest.

Our hands of praise of course extend outside these walls. We praise God with our hands when we drop off an invite to a neighbor or friend to come and hear what our Savior has done. Our hands of praise help a neighbor with a project, work faithfully and hard at our jobs. Our hands of praise can be taking time away from work to care for our families, to spend time with them, to hear their needs and meet them as we can. Our hands of praise are being good, attentive parents, taking care of our children's need, caring for them when they're sick. They're being a good spouse who seeks to serve your husband or wife ahead of yourself. Whenever we do any of these things, we are using our hands to praise God by living in obedience to his Word.

Our hands have not always been instruments of praise to God. Lord, we have often questioned you, doubted you, put off fulfilling your commands in our lives. We have been stingy with our hands, choosing to serve ourselves rather than those around us, rather than you. We have sinned against you, often failing to praise you. Forgive us. Take away our sins. "Save us, please, Lord! Hosanna!"

Jesus fulfilled that request by riding on into Jerusalem. He came exactly as prophesied, going forward knowing that this road leads to his death. He rode on knowing that this is how he will answer the cries of praise, the hosannas of these people, our hosannas. This is how he will bring us into his kingdom. This is how he saves us.

Since Christ rode on, our hands are washed clean. We praise him again. We praise him with our lips, and we ask, Lord, to help us to use our hands to praise you as we follow your Word, that we be generous with what you have entrusted to us that it would serve you as we serve others. Make our hands hands of praise at all times and in all places because you have answered our Hosannas. Amen.