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Matthew 21:1-11 (Palm Sunday)

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

I need a hero. And I bet you do too. A hero is someone who rescues others from danger even at great personal risk or cost to themselves. Heroes are plentiful in the movies. It seems that nearly every other month a new superhero movie comes out, featuring brave men or women with unusual powers who fly in to rescue the planet from certain doom. But heroes are not all that common in our real lives. Occasionally we might read about a military hero who saved a buddy from death, or about a firefighter who showed bravery in the line of duty. And sometimes we learn about ordinary people who rush into burning buildings or leap into water to rescue someone. But in general, most of us don't encounter heroes in our daily lives. Although, we would *love* to have a hero in our own lives. We would love someone to rescue us from our problems: from our financial struggles, from our addictions and destructive habits, from our personal grief or despair, from our relationship problems.

Because human heroes are not all that common in our ordinary lives, we sometimes look to non-human stand-ins for heroes, things that we hope will rescue us from our struggles: the lottery ticket we buy with the hopes that we will win and all our problems will be solved; or the new relationship we imagine will remake us and bring us lasting happiness; or the next job we seek which we think will be our ticket to fulfillment. We're holding out for a hero to rescue us, to save us from all that is wrong in our lives.

Of course, this line of thinking doesn't pan out. The material things or the people we look to to save us, rarely do so. Usually, we will discover that the new people who enter our lives are just as flawed as the previous people in our lives and that they have not saved us from all that

plagues us. Material goods lose their luster pretty quickly. The new job comes with its own problems and imperfections. So, we don't really find heroes in these people or circumstances.

That is what lies behind the success of the self-help industry. The message behind the books and infomercials of the self-help movement is that *you* have to become your own hero. No one else can do that for you. Each of us must become our own savior. If we want to stop smoking, lose weight, manage our money better, improve our relationships, we have to learn how to do this for ourselves.

Of course, personal empowerment *is* an important message for all of us to learn. It's certainly better than sitting around hoping for something to change in our lives but doing nothing to make it happen. However, personal empowerment can't save us either. We can't save ourselves because we are imperfect and flawed. We should indeed acknowledge our flaws and we should indeed attempt to work on our issues and strive to change our behaviors--but we won't ever completely rescue ourselves from our problems or heal ourselves from what ails us. Some of what we need rescuing from is ourselves, and our brokenness, and the factors and forces that lie within us that we will never completely solve by ourselves.

Thus, we need a hero. We all do. And that is why today is a celebration. That is why today we gather to praise God and rejoice. Because today a hero arrives into our lives. That is what this celebration of Palm Sunday is all about--the arrival of our hero.

Those folks who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with their branches and cries of "Hosanna" were a lot like us in that they had a particular idea of what a hero looked like and should do for them. The term the Jewish people used to talk about the hero they needed and hoped for was the word "messiah." They believed that one day, God would send the Messiah to save them. In particular, the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem thought that the Messiah

would save them from the brutal cruelty of their Roman oppressors. They thought Jesus was the hero who was going to accomplish this rescue. And so they shouted "Hosanna" which means in Hebrew, "Save us!" Here was their hero, riding in to save them.

And he *was* their hero. It's just that he didn't come to save them in the way they imagined. He wasn't going to be the hero who would take up arms and lead the people in a violent revolt. And while it would be incorrect to claim that Jesus was not political, because any time you champion the people at the bottom of society, any time you affirm the worth and value of outcasts and the poor, any time you criticize the leaders for their greed and corruption as Jesus did, you are being political. But nevertheless, Jesus never aimed to take over the government or to lead a violent uprising. Jesus was not a conventional hero. Instead of grinding your enemy to dust, instead of promoting conventional ideas of power and victory and domination and control, Jesus taught his followers that rescue and salvation were found in the way of love, the way of compassion, the way of forgiveness.

Yes, of course, Jesus saw and understood the terrible external forces at work in the world that brought suffering and oppression and cruelty. He saw this every day under the Roman occupation. But Jesus also saw our captivity to forces that lie within the human heart and soul that when expressed outwardly give rise to the suffering and injustice and ugliness in our world--forces like greed, and selfishness, and resentment, and hatred, and insecurities. Jesus came to rescue us from these very real and very dangerous forces that lie within us, which bring about so much suffering to ourselves and others. These are very powerful forces that lie within all of us. And so he came to rescue us. He came as a hero to usher in a reign of peace, not warfare; who taught love, not hate; who preached forgiveness, not vengeance.

Today we celebrate the arrival of our hero. Because we all need a hero.

When I can't see the good in another person because all I can focus on is their mistakes and flaws, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I am so consumed with anger at someone, when I know my anger is justified, when I desire to hold a grudge, when forgiveness seems impossible, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I think the suffering I see on TV is someone else's problem, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When my bad mood, petty complaints, daily irritations obscure the joy of life and the goodness of God all around me, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I succumb to the influence of culture telling me that my primary identity is a consumer, and I seek comfort, and joy, and fulfillment in what I can buy, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I confront my own dark side, the things about myself that are not noble or good, when my flaws and failings lead me to despair or feelings of worthlessness, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I am afraid to speak out about an issue, to name something that is wrong, to advocate for what is right because of how others may react, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I seek my security in what I can accumulate, when I want more, when I am reluctant to share, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

When I look at those who are my adversaries, people who I do not like, people who hold ideas or beliefs so different from my own, people who promote policies I profoundly disagree with, when I look at them and do not recall that they too are beloved by God, I need a hero. And I bet you do too.

Jesus comes to liberate us from these dangerous and harmful forces that we confront every single day of our lives and which hold us captive, and he shows us a more excellent way of living. Love, compassion, justice, generosity, forgiveness. These powerful gifts can set us free. Today we rejoice because God has seen our affliction, our pain, and our captivity and sends us a hero to set us free. And then we are invited to follow him on the path of heroism.