Palm Sunday, April 12, 1987
**OUR HERO WILL SAVE US (NO. 4 IN A SERIES: LIES WE TELL EACH OTHER)**
Matthew 21:1-11

A popular theme in literature is to have a hero or heroine come to the rescue. A tribe, nation, or some other collection of people — perhaps a town — is in trouble. The bad guys have gotten control. There is no one available to throw the bad guys out. Then the hero arrives: white hat, white horse, two guns on his belt, and single-handedly, he defeats the enemy, and the town is free once again. We know the story. We've seen it in movies about the Old West over and over again. It's the same theme for other kinds of heroes like Superman.

"Our hero will save us." It's one of the lies we tell each other. It's also a way for the rest of us to avoid taking responsibility or to work at difficult and long-range solutions to a problem. We wait for the hero.

We see this lie at work in politics. Over and over again, we believe that if only the right person is elected, he or she can put all things back in order. Taxes will not be raised. They might even be lowered. The crime rate will go down. Our enemies will be put in their place, and everyone will live happily ever after.

It's an old lie. It's also the story of that first Palm Sunday. The Hebrews had been under the control of the Roman Empire for too long. No country likes to be occupied by another. Continually there had been talk of revolution. All that was needed was the right leader, the hero. He could lead the revolution, and everything would then be put back in order.

That first Palm Sunday was a festive occasion because many in the crowd believed that Jesus was that kind of hero. They had heard of His miracles. There was even a story circulating through the streets that He had raised a man named Lazarus from the dead.

Many in the crowd that day were carrying palms, symbols of peace, but then the Roman authorities forbade the carrying of spears. To be sure, they were praising God; but they were also hailing the King of Israel, the new King David. Some of them no doubt remembered the prophecy of Zechariah: "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey." And they thought of previous kings like Saul, David, and Solomon. Our hero will save us! It's a tempting lie.

And while the crowd shouted wildly, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel," Jesus, however, instead of smiling and acknowledging the cheers, weeps over the city and its people.

The Gospel according to Luke reports: "And when Jesus drew near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes.'"

Had Jesus wept only for what He had earlier predicted would happen to Him, that would be poignant enough. Instead, He weeps for what He is sure will befall the very people who today are urging Him on, and who tomorrow, because of their blindness and disappointment, will be shouting, "Crucify Him!"

Yet it shouldn't surprise us. We want to believe the lie — our hero will save us. And he will save us by using the power of force, by using all the violence necessary, by destroying without mercy all our enemies. And out of this vast destruction and suffering, there will come something called victory, and this will ensure the emergence of a better world.

Then, as now, human beings worshiped power. Jesus knew long before Lord Acton said it: "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Jesus knew the tendency of power to become a theology, admitting no other gods before it. He knew the tendency of power to distort and damage the traditions and institutions it was designed to protect.

The Palm Sunday story teaches us the deepest lessons about ourselves and the lie we so desperately want to believe: "Our hero will save us." The truth is our hero cannot save us in the way we think he can. And our worldly power cannot save us in the way we like to think it can. The truth is that it will more likely destroy us.

The truth that Jesus taught is that all people stand in need of a merciful God and that all politics should begin with repentance and forgiveness.

How, then, do we overcome the lie, "Our hero will save us?" By looking to the truth. And the first part of the truth is this:

We begin by admitting we are creatures always trying to deny our creatureliness. We are always trying to overcome a sense — and a false sense at that — of insignificance.
When the first space shuttle got off the ground, it was a thrilling sight. The President of the United States sent a message to the space-bound astronauts: "You go in the hand of God." That was modest enough, but he went on: "Through you today we all feel as giants once again." The implication was that before this event, we had been feeling insignificant.

But now our heroes would save us. Through them and their accomplishments, we could all feel bigger and better. The President went on to say about that event: "Once again, we feel the surge of pride that comes from knowing we are the first, and we are the best."

Everyone wants to feel they are the first and the best, and if we can't do it ourselves, we can always experience it vicariously through our heroes and heroines.

Sometimes, too, in our attempts to feel significant, we find others we can put beneath us. We scapegoat others into insignificance — into being second. We find someone we think is worse than us so that we can feel better.

Jesus, however, refused to be the kind of hero that the crowd wanted Him to be on that first Palm Sunday. He knew the idolatry of hero worship. He knew the false pride it creates. He knew it was a lie to believe that our heroes or heroines can save us.

What, then, is the alternative? What is the further truth that God's coming in Jesus brings us?

The second part of the truth is: Our heroes cannot save us. Our political leaders cannot save us, no matter how good they are. Our bombs and nuclear weapons cannot save us. It is always so tempting to take hold of some seemingly simple solution — such as, "What we ought to do is just bomb the hell out of those people," and if our passion is great enough, we may even be willing to blow ourselves up in the process of trying to save ourselves. Our religious leaders cannot save us. Only God's suffering love as seen in Jesus Christ can save

us. That's the truth of Palm Sunday. That's the truth that the people who greeted Jesus that day found it so difficult to believe. It's the truth we find so difficult to believe.

The third part of the truth is this: Jesus did not want people to cling to Him. Rather, He wanted people then, and people now, to know and experience God's presence in and among them. As Martin Luther said long ago, we are to become little Christs to each other and to the world. Jesus' mission was to lead people to God, not to Himself. We can and do remake Jesus into our own kind of hero-idol, as for example, when we make Him into our "personal Savior." Jesus was not the object of the message He preached.

Taking Jesus at His word means that we are now able to live our lives in this world in a new way. We no longer have to live according to the old lies that are in the culture.

Now we know that no one is excluded from God's love. God's grace is and always has been everywhere. So when Jesus spoke of enlarged borders and a greater destiny, He was not speaking of conquest and more territory; rather, He was talking of broader sympathies and broken barriers of race and class. "God so loved the world, the whole world and everything in creation, that God came in Christ, and God is now and always a part and in every part of this creation, including each one of us."

That's what Palm Sunday is about — not Jesus coming as a worldly leader or conqueror, or hero into Jerusalem. It is about God coming into this world, empowering the weak, healing the hurt, and taking on the suffering of the world. And we know something on this Palm Sunday that those citizens of Jerusalem did not know on that day — we know that Jesus died and was raised on Easter. We know that God is ever among us and in us. We don't need a hero or heroine because God is already a part of us and in us. Amen.