

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham, Rector
Hosanna to the Son of David
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, Year A
April 5, 2020

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

*"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

(In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.)

Palm Sunday's liturgy is an exercise in contrast. We begin with shouts of, "Hosanna to the King of David," and we end in death. The scripture readings set the stage for all of Holy Week. We begin outside of Jerusalem with celebration. Entering the city, celebration turns into something else entirely. Ultimately Jesus is betrayed, arrested, and executed by the government. We begin in the bright light of day, with crowds of people gathered where they can see and welcome Jesus. We end in darkness alone in a tomb where no one witnesses the resurrection. Today asks us to hold all of that at once.

The Bible describes the parade of people waving green branches and laying their clothing down to make a pathway for Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus and the donkey ride down from the East, down the Mount of Olives, and into Jerusalem. Historians tell us about another parade, not recorded in the Bible. This one from the other direction; from the West. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, paraded into Jerusalem from the other side. Pilate was heading into Jerusalem to maintain law and order. Pilate came every year, leaving his beautiful seaside palace at Caesarea Maritima, presumably riding on an impressive horse, and making as large and pompous a parade as he could. The Jewish festival of Passover was in a few days, and was sometimes a flash point for protest against the empire. Under normal circumstances, Jerusalem would have had about 40,000 inhabitants. In preparation for the Passover, there may have been as many as 200,000 pilgrims in the holy city. Pilate came each year to remind the crowds who it was that ruled Jerusalem.

In contrast to Pilate on his mighty warhorse, Jesus' triumphal entry was on the back of a lowly donkey. Rather than the powerful and mighty, the upper class of Jerusalem, Jesus was

welcomed by peasants and laborers. Never underestimate the power of this statement being made. The contrast was there for all to see. Jesus wasn't crucified for being too nice. He was crucified because he posed a political threat to those established in positions of power. The crowd welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna to the Son of David. David their beloved King. Jesus, the Son of the King, parading in humility into the Holy City on the back of a donkey, in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy.

"Hosanna!" is what we shout today. We think of it as a kind of a cheerful salute. Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! But Hosanna is a word with a meaning. Hosanna is an ancient Aramaic word. It means 'to save or rescue.' This is what the people are shouting, "Save us, we pray. Save us, Son of David."

Hosanna. Save us. This is, I think, a good year to re-embrace the meaning of this word. In the past few weeks, I've heard more and more people using this prayer language. Save us, O Lord. Save us from illness, pandemic, and death. Save us from loss and grief. Save our hospital workers, first responders, scientists, and our loved ones. Hosanna.

At this, the beginning of Holy Week, we have a choice of where to put our trust, and who to cry out to. The people of Jerusalem had a choice of which parade they would attend. The one that glorified prestige, the Roman empire, and earthly power, or the one that celebrated a humble man from a backwater town who glorified a life of service and who shared everything he had. A man who loved, prayed, healed, taught, and accepted everyone who came to him. Many of the crowd shouting, "Hosanna!" thought that Jesus would overthrow their enemy. Their enemy, they knew, was the Roman Empire. They hoped he would sit on the throne of David and rule over Israel. But things weren't what people thought they were. Jesus didn't overthrow Pilate. Pilate, it turns out, wasn't the enemy Jesus came to fight. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, came to bring life and life abundant. The enemy he came to fight was death itself.

We are fortunate in that we can see from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday into the hope of the Resurrection and the empty tomb. This entire week, as we walk from celebration, into disbelief, into utter despair, grief and loss, all of these things are encompassed into the final victory. Every one of the days of Holy Week is a celebration. Yes, even Good Friday. Death has lost its sting. Hosanna indeed. Jesus saves.

But he didn't do it the way anyone expected. Within 50 years of his death, the Roman Empire destroyed Jerusalem and tore down the great Temple. God's chosen people were scattered into the diaspora. Life was permanently changed. So, too, we may not get what we expect. I'm not going to tell you that we'll make it through this pandemic and go back to life the way we knew it. Everything is changing and I suspect many of the changes will cause other changes. Eventually this will be over, but life is going to be different.

People are dying and we won't be able to bring them back to life. The message of Holy Week, the *celebration* of each day of Holy Week, including Good Friday, the day of the crucifixion, is NOT that we will get to forgo change and death. Not even Jesus got to do that. The celebration and the cause of our Christian joy is that death doesn't have the last word. It isn't the end. Christ shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither

shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things will pass away. Death gives way to life.

In the service of Holy Baptism, the priest prays for the people saying, "Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son, may live in the power of his resurrection." We are those baptized people. We've been baptized into Christ's death and we know in our hearts that there is nothing on earth that can happen to us that will separate us from the love of Christ Jesus.

That love took Jesus into Jerusalem onto this day. Jesus' love for us led him to his throne. It wasn't the throne of David, or of Pilate, or of Caesar. It was the throne of a cross and a crown of thorns. That love transformed a tomb full of death and darkness into a place that will be visited forevermore because of its sheer and utter emptiness. Death has no dominion. Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

Amen.