

Palm Sunday (Year A)

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.’

My sermon will be a little bit shorter than normal this morning. I’ll admit, between my responsibilities of leading this congregation during a global pandemic, assembling nursery furniture, and practicing self-care, it’s been a lot. Perhaps you know the feeling as well. We’re all a little stretched right now, aren’t we? At any rate, my sermon will probably be about five minutes shorter than it typically is.

But I’m asking you to do something with that extra five minutes you’ll have today. I’m asking you to take five minutes sometime after this worship service to reach out to another member of our faith family. Take five minutes to either call them, write them a card, or reach out to them on social media. My only other request is that you reach out to someone who you have *not* yet had a chance to contact since we were last able to gather physically. Let’s widen the circles of connection! And if you’re not a member of this congregation - perhaps you’re watching on Facebook Live or Youtube Live or on our website - then I invite you to do the same with someone you know or someone you want to know better.

And now on to the sermon!

Well, I think it’s official: this has been the “Lentiest” Lent ever. This “wilderness” has been a place of learning, adapting, and unexpected connection. But there is plenty of wilderness to remain. This wilderness, this time of social distancing, is going to extend well beyond Easter Sunday. But hear again this good news that

we've been proclaiming all through this wilderness season of Lent: God does not abandon us in the wilderness. God goes with us *through* the wilderness as a friend.

And thus, we find ourselves at Palm Sunday. Normally, we would be waving palm branches, as the few of us who are here did during the opening hymn. But today we are hunkered in our homes. Perhaps you can imagine this day that your home was in Jerusalem way back when Jesus was parading into the city.

To be sure, the people in Jerusalem had heard a lot about this Jesus person and, frankly, it was making the Romans very nervous. You see, people who have power like to keep it that way. They get a bit anxious when people start putting their trust in other things or other people. Worship after all is about trust. And the caesars and the pharaohs of the world would much rather us worship them than, well, anything or anyone else.

The people were beginning to place their devotion, or at least their curiosity, in a man that they had heard healed people and didn't charge a copay. In a man who told them to turn the other cheek when violence struck them. In a man who fed people not because they had money to eat but simply because they were hungry. In a man who offered living water and daily bread. In a man who gave sight to the blind and challenged pharisees to see religion in a new way.

So as they heard that Jesus was entering Jerusalem, they flocked to the streets to greet him. And they shouted a familiar phrase to us, one that we sing each and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. It sounds like this:

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest! Hosanna in the highest!*

Do you know what Hosanna means? Much of the time, we assume that it means something like "Yay" or "Yipee" or "Hip, hip, hooray!" Actually, it doesn't mean any of those things. The word "hosanna" is Aramaic in its original and it literally means, "save us."

Now, it certainly can be said (or sung) in a jubilant way but in its original form it is less of an acclamation and more of a petition. "Save us" the people shouted. Save us from the tyranny of the Roman Empire. Save us from economic inequality. Save us from our despair. Save us from our illness. Save us from our plight. Save us, save us, save us.

And Jesus came to do exactly that, if not in the way that the folks of that time were expecting. You see, they were expecting a military coup, a violent overthrow of their Roman occupiers. But that was never Jesus' intent. His salvation was not through violence but peace, not through coercion but invitation.

I suspect many of us are crying "hosanna" this day. We want to be saved. We want to leave the confines of our homes, if we are lucky enough to have a roof over our head. We want to be able to hug our friends again. We want to meet our new grandchildren. We want to go to the grocery store without the anxiety and fear. We want to get back to our jobs. We want to see where our next paycheck is coming from. We want to get back to normal.

Friends, on this Palm Sunday, I'm here to announce to you that our hosannas have been heard. Whether you lift that hosanna in a sanctuary or in your living room doesn't matter. God hears our hosannas. And God will save us.

But that doesn't give us the right to be irresponsible. There are some churches out there that say "God will save us and therefore that means we can safely gather physically for worship." Y'all, that's not how *any* of this works.

Yes, God will save us. But God will save us by giving us scientists, epidemiologists, nurses, doctors, grocery store workers. God will save us by inviting us to practice the kind of self-sacrificial love that Jesus embodied. And right now we're embodying that self-sacrificial love by listening to the healthcare professionals who tell us that being #HealthyAtHome is how we get through this with as few deaths as possible. God will save us by sending us "hosanna people" who will save us and are currently saving us.

So my question to you this day is two-fold:

First of all, how can we show our gratitude to the "hosanna people" around us?

And, secondly, how can we ourselves be "hosanna people?"

Remember, friends, gratitude keeps us grounded in times of disorientation. This week, I challenge you to reach out to a "hosanna person" around you and thank them for saving us. Send a thank you card to a grocery store worker. Call up a hospital worker that you know and tell them thank you. Give a special gift to a custodial worker. Be creative. What ways can you find to express gratitude to the "hosanna people" in your life.

Finally, continue to practice being a "hosanna person" yourself. How can you follow Jesus' footsteps to care for one another and to practice the love he brings us? First of all, the best way you can be a hosanna person is to stay at home. Our Governor has informed us that the next two or three weeks are going to be crucial if we are to beat this virus the first time. Stay home. Be safe. If you're able, enjoy this weather and go for a walk while practicing social distancing.

Another way you can be a "hosanna person" is to pray for me and the elders as we seek to lead this congregation in this difficult time. They're doing a lot of work right now to keep this congregation connected. Don't forget to check in on *them* and make sure they know that their efforts are appreciated.

Finally, my heart has been warmed by seeing the positive social media posts that the Governor shares with us every day at his 5:00 P.M. press briefing. I see pictures of children with sidewalk chalk sharing uplifting and encouraging messages. I see individuals and businesses working hard to create masks and other forms of PPE to keep everyone safe. I see people who light up their houses green on days when Kentuckians have died from COVID-19. I see people ringing bells at 10:00 A.M. I see pictures of children playing with each other on different sides of the street. I see people going the extra mile to be gentle and compassionate with one another. Friends, each and every one of these acts are hosanna acts done by hosanna people.

So on this Palm Sunday, let us follow our hosanna savior into the places where we can be hosanna people.

In the name God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's hosanna people, say:
Amen!