

Do You Desire Hosanna?

Rev. Matt Landry

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SCRIPTURE READING *Gospel of John 12: 12-19*

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!"

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

¹⁵"Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;

see, your king is coming,

seated on a donkey's colt."

¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

This morning we enter into the holiest of weeks. Holy Week is often a week filled with anticipation for what's to come next Sunday. We rarely stay in Palm Sunday for long, but let's linger here with the crowd for a bit longer. You'll have to excuse me for a moment, there's something in my pocket that's poking me. It's this little pocket cross that I have been carrying around during the season of Lent. For nearly 40 long days now, Jesus has been a thorn in my side, no pun intended. Seriously though, it's been a good reminder to keep my heart, my mind, my desire on Christ during this season. Every time I have been tempted and I have placed my hand in my pocket and what do you think I would find? Yep, it was Jesus who was poking me in my leg.

This is what Palm Sunday is for. Today is a day to prepare for the rest of the week, that's true, as it's a reminder to get us in a place to follow Jesus into this holiest of weeks and to greet the risen Lord next Sunday. Before we get to the rest of the week, this morning we find ourselves joining the crowd as we anticipate Jesus' triumphal entry into the City of Jerusalem. We wave our palm branches just as the crowd did in all of the Gospels. In ancient times, palm branches symbolized goodness, well-being, and most importantly victory. King Solomon had palm trees carved into the walls and doors of the temple as recorded in 1 Kings. Even at the end of the Bible, in Revelation, we find people from every nation, tribe, and language standing before the throne and before the lamb wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. We join the crowds who lined the path leading to Jerusalem waving our palm branches of victory to Jesus.

It doesn't end with the simple waving of the palms though; we begin to hear the response of the crowd shouting "Hosanna" to the king. The enthusiasm of this crowd who gathered near Jerusalem that Palm Sunday did not coalesce that day alone, it had been happening for a while, ever since the lake. When the crowd witnessed Jesus feeding the 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, they began to say "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into

the world." The word spread, Jesus' popularity grew and the crowd wanted to coronate him on the spot, but Jesus wanted no part of the crowd's desire to make him their kind of king and he instead withdrew to the mountainside by himself.

Now, as we gather with the crowd on Palm Sunday, the people have gathered in Jerusalem to prepare and purify themselves for the festival of Passover. They hear that Jesus is about to enter the city and they know what he is up against. At the very end of John 11, right after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the chief priests and the Pharisees started their plot to kill Jesus. The crowd knew what Jesus was up against and they were ready to proclaim victory for King Jesus. They gathered their palm branches, signs of victory, and they shout their "Hosannas", which is from Psalm 118: 25-26, "Lord, save us! ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." "Hosanna" really means save us, but how? How can Jesus save the crowd? How can Jesus save us? They wanted Jesus to be their king, and more importantly, their kind of king. They wanted him to take a side, to be a political, national, earthly ruling Messiah.

That's what they meant. What did you mean when you waved your palm branches and sang "Hosanna" this morning? I heard you do it. I sort of watched you do it. You didn't seem too excited or exuberant about waving your palm branches and saying "Hosanna." Should we try it again? I think we should. From now on, during the rest of the sermon, whenever I say, "Hosanna", raise your palms and say "Hosanna." Can you do that?

When we say "Hosanna" we are proclaiming with the Psalmist and with the Palm Sunday crowd "Lord, save us." It really is a cry or a plea for help. When we place this phrase in the context of Psalm 118, it adds to its meaning. The Psalm begins with God's praises, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." It continues with the promises of God, that it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust humans or princes. Even though the nations surrounded me on every side, I was pushed back and about to fall, the Lord helped me, the Lord is my strength and my defense, he has become my salvation." Finally, we get to verse 22, often used this week for Jesus, "The stone the builders have rejected has become the cornerstone. Lord, save us!" or "Hosanna!" " Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

This psalm and that phrase is really all about God, but the crowd of Palm Sunday somehow changed the meaning. This really is a shout of surrender, a plea for help, even though the crowd who gathered that day had their own desires for Jesus. They had their expectations for candidate Jesus who they thought was running to be the next king and would overthrow the Roman and religious leaders. When we waved those palm branches and shouted the famous phrase, which was "Hosanna," did we have our own expectations for who Jesus is to us and who Jesus should be?

Whether we admit it or not, we all have our expectations for who Jesus should be or should love or should heal or should save. It could be our expectation that God will answer our prayers exactly as we wish, when we want it. It could be that our image of God looks exactly like us and that's our expectation we place on God or we want God to take the side we're already on. It could be that we pray for that person to change their mind or ways and we expect God to hear and answer that prayer.

I'll never forget hearing a Catholic sister share one time about how she was having an issue with another person. This nun was angry, I mean red hot angry at this other person. She would often pray, "Lord, change this person." She remarked that she was "right not contrite." Then she started sitting in front of the their life size crucifix with Jesus hanging on it in the convent where she lived. She would pray and pray that God would change that person. After a few months, closer to a year, she said God finally moved her through prayer to a place of reconciliation and even friendship with this person. Her expectations for God had changed. God didn't want her to try to change that other person, God wanted to change her, but she had to let go of her expectations.

After I heard that story years ago, I began carrying around my pocket cross every Lent as a reminder that I can't place my expectations onto Jesus, expecting Jesus to give me my victory, my success, my glory. That's not why Jesus went to the cross. Jesus went to the cross to save me from my own sinful desires, my hope for my own gain. This can be true of our prayers we pray too. We pray with expectation that God will give us this or that, will fix him or her, will move when we choose or ask God to move, but that's not how God works nor is it the way that Jesus is God's King.

Now I'm going to quote a theologian I have never quoted before and probably a clergy person never quoted in a Methodist church. Augustus Toplady was an 18th C. Anglican cleric and was major opponent of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. In an attempt at reconciliation this morning, Augustus wrote, sorry Fr. John Wesley, "When Christ entered into Jerusalem the people spread garments in the way: when He enters into our hearts, we pull off our own righteousness, and not only lay it under Christ's feet but even trample upon it ourselves." While he and Wesley disagreed, I this phrase is important to consider. When Jesus enters our hearts, we pull off our own notion of righteousness and our belief that we have it all figured out. To be truly saved is to let go of those things that hold us back from following Jesus to the cross and resurrection life. We let go of sin, our belief we have found righteousness, and our own expectations.

The crowd placed their expectations on Jesus that day, but the good news is that Jesus is committed to being the king of God's Kingdom, not mine and not yours. While the crowd shouted "Hosanna", proclaimed victory for Jesus, instead he rides into the city on a young donkey. He attempts to correct the crowd's expectations using the prophecy from Zechariah, "Do not be afraid daughter of Zion. Look your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt." There's no war horse or chariot for this king, just a humble donkey. I wonder if the sight of Jesus on that donkey quieted the crowd or made them shout all the more. I wonder if it changed the expectations of anyone in the crowd that day.

Are we willing to travel the road with Jesus this week? It is not an easy or straight road for Jesus or us to walk. It is a road that leads to places we don't want to go. There will be a meal later this week that everyone is invited to. Those people we disagree with or don't like, they're invited. They'll be invited to dine with Jesus. Will you be there? There will be a denial of who Jesus is by one of his closed disciples. Will that be you this week? There will be a trial where Jesus will be questioned. Will you stand as a witness with him? They will nail him to a cross and put him in a

place for all the world to see his humiliation and torture. He will die. He will be placed in the tomb and silence will come. Then are you still willing to proclaim "Hosanna"?

You weren't so sure that time. It's not easy to walk the way of Christ, but it is the road that leads to resurrection life. The good news we hear today is that Jesus is the king of this week. Even when our desires for him are shattered, even when we are disappointed or dismayed by what is happening to Jesus or all around us, even when we are confused or lost because God seems absent or silent; when we shed our expectations, we will then be free to enter into the joy of his resurrection. What are your expectations for this Holy Week and Easter?

To answer that, I think we can turn to the crowd's words once more. Their proclamation was a portion of Psalm 118. When Jesus washes his disciple's feet and offers the bread and the cup, we remember "His love endures forever." When Jesus faces his arrest and trial, "His love endures forever." When Jesus is crucified and died and was buried. "His love endures forever." When Jesus is placed in the tomb and we're not sure if the sun will rise again. "His love endures forever." Even when all seems lost, which is exactly the sentiment in many of the psalms, we know that it is better to trust in God, to take refuge in God, and to know that the Lord will indeed save us. Jesus went to the cross to show us what love looks like. He invites down that same road. On that road we find salvation, hope, forgiveness, and abundant life. That's why we proclaim "Hosanna." That's why we wave those palm branches to proclaim the victory of God's love that will be made reality in and through Jesus this week. We don't wave them in anticipation of our own expectations being realized, we wave them in anticipation of God's dream, God's love, our salvation being realized. That's why we shout "Hosanna" not just today, but throughout this week, to Easter Sunday, and into the joy of eternal life. May we proclaim with our lips what is already in our hearts: "Lord, save us!" We desire "Hosanna"!

Let us pray:

You are on your way to Jerusalem, precious Lord.

*You are one your way to suffering and to death
for the sake of our freedom and our salvation.*

This is mystery and wonder.

Our hearts overflow into songs of praise.

"Hosanna!", we cry with the crowds.

"Blessed are you who comes in God's name!"

Yet, you puzzle us:

you puzzle us with your suffering love

that is more powerful than our brokenness;

you puzzle us with your freely chosen humility

that brings blessings in our weary places;

you puzzle us with your forgiveness

that summons us beyond our hurt.

Liberating Savior,

you make us uncomfortable

so that you can lead us

*into more life
and deeper wonder;
so that God can take who we are
and break us open,
and bless us
and give us to the world.*

*Grant us grace
to welcome this holy restlessness,
that we may live by the power of your Spirit,
and in your name. Amen.*