

HOSANNA!

Matthew 21:1-11; Palm/Passion Sunday, a
March 16, 2008
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Prayer: Dear God, is it a parade or a prelude to a tragedy that you invite us to today? Are we to be happy for Jesus, or sad about what happened to him later in the week? Help us, O God, in this time together, to enter into this story in all its ambiguity, so much like the stories of our lives. And so comfort those of us who need comforted; welcome those who feel excluded; challenge those who are comfortable, and save us all. Amen.

Palm Sunday isn't what it used to be. Oh, we do our best make it a festive frenzy with organized chaos of children coming down the aisle waving palms, singing ...

*All glory, laud and honor,
To Thee Redeemer, King,
To whom the lips of children,
Made sweet hosannas ring.*

Some churches in urban areas still gather with other churches and have outdoor processions, sometimes even with real live donkeys. We like to picture ourselves as those among the crowds waving and shouting "Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna to the Son of David. Bless is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

I remember thinking that Palm Sunday was like the preliminary game, spring training, if you will, a kind of warm up for the "really big show" which comes the following Sunday. But Palm Sunday isn't what it used to be.

Theologians (and really good ones), and liturgists and even pastors have started taking another look at this day, and what it should be all about. They've noticed that mid-week services during Holy Week aren't what they used to be either. Folks just don't come out for a Maundy Thursday or Good Friday evening service. We've cancelled our early morning prayer service we've had in the past few years during Holy Week. The staff and a few others would show up, but that's about it. And there are some good reasons. Spring break takes some away. We're very busy during this time of the year because our workplace, most of our schools, and the rhythm of our culture just don't make accommodations for this week.

But it also might have to do with the soberness of Maundy Thursday and the outright brutality of Good Friday. We are, after all, increasingly a culture that savors a more upbeat religion. And the story of this week is too hard to bear.

There is a true story of a friend of mine, a pastor, who shared a letter from an irate parent to the kindergarten teacher in the pre-school there in her church. The mother knew that this pre-school included teaching and celebrating church holidays, and had agreed to this religious education.

And so in the spring the teachers taught the Easter story, but they could not tell about Easter without also telling about Holy Week and Good Friday. So the teachers told the kindergartners about Jesus' ride into Jerusalem and the grand parade. But they also told them that on a Friday Jesus had died on a cross and many people were sad.

One little girl was hearing the story for the first time in that class. Her mother's angry letter to the teacher said this: "I do not object to my daughter learning about Jesus and Easter. I know it is part of the curriculum. But I strongly protest your telling her that Jesus died on a cross. She was very upset by it. She cried and cried, and asked me why anyone would want to hurt such a nice man. I have tried to reassure her concerning this, but I expect you to make amends."

Even adults have a hard time facing this week. Anne Lamott writes: "I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking."¹

The problem, however, with just skipping over the week, going from "Hosanna!" to "Alleluia!" is, according to these theologians (good ones) and liturgists and pastors is that there is a danger of developing a warped faith. That may sound strange in our culture, but let me explain: What happens to faith that has not had a chance to struggle—faith that has not grappled with truly difficult moments in the life of God? It might become a faith that wilts in the face of hardship and tragedy. After all, if you believe that life is one long party for those who trust in God, then what happens when the party ends? Does faith end too?

And so what those who frame our liturgical year have come up with is a Palm(slash)Passion Sunday. A day in which we honor both the parade *into* the city, and the parade five days later going *out* of the city. A day in which we might shout "Hosanna!" but a day in which we also shout "Crucify him!" Some have actually suggested that we jettison the idea of a Palm Sunday and focus the service for the day on "Passion Sunday," reading the entire passion narrative from one of the gospels, not just 11 short verses.

But if we did that, we might miss out on that one word that we hardly ever use, even in church. (Certainly not in every day conversation.) "Hosanna." The people cheered. They tossed branches from the trees to the ground, and they called out "Hosanna." "Hosanna." We often think of it as being a word of praise, like "Hip hip hooray!" But it is a cry of desperation. It means "Save us." I think the meaning of both Palm Sunday and Holy Week can be summed up in those two words: "Save us."

Now, if you ask most Christians today what that means, what do we need to be saved from, the answer might be, "from hell." But I can assure you that the people lining the streets of Jerusalem that day were not concerned about being saved from hell, the kind of hell that we imagine after death. Take a look at Jesus' entire life in the gospels, and you'll find that the people wanted to be "saved" from the yoke of the Roman empire. They wanted liberation from an occupying army. They had had enough of the violence, humiliation, the rapes of their women, the enslavement of

their men. The hell that they wanted delivered from was the hell of their own lives, right then and there.

I have a friend, Scott Black Johnston, who met with his confirmation class a few years ago and, in response to their questions ahead of time, came to talk about heaven and hell and salvation. “If God was really on the ball,” he asked them, “what would God save *you* from?”

After a silence, one of the guys said “from an upcoming math test.” But then they got a bit more serious. One said “Pressure.” Another said “My parents’ expectations.” Another, a very shy one said “Fear. I want God to save me from my fears.” And Scott said that this led to one of the most honest conversations he has ever had with anyone, because all the jargon and presuppositions of theological inquiry were stripped away, and he felt that the argument could be made that their comments gave a pretty clear picture of what “hell” looked like to a young person.

Scott then asked his congregation: “Can we dip down into our souls and be as honest as these young people were? When we wave our palms and boldly cry out “Hosanna,” do we dare imagine what we really want God to save us from? Save me from anger. Save me from cancer. Save me from boredom. Save me from getting back to Iraq. Save me from the endless cycle of violence. Save me from humiliation. Save me from staring at the ceiling at 3:00 a.m. wondering why I exist. Save me from bitterness. Save me from arrogance. Save me from loneliness. Save me, God, save me from my fears.”²

You see, maybe imbedded in our pageantry and shouts is an appeal to God that comes from the deepest, most vulnerable parts inside of us “Hosanna.” “Save us.” Please God take the broken places that are tearing us up and making us whole.

But then, of course, after our cries and our pleas, we are left with the questions: Does God hear our cries? Does God do anything to save us? How? Well, the easiest answer is to walk this week with us through the mystery of this week. (I realize that’s a cheap plug to come here on Thursday and Friday, and then to Easter, but it’s the best answer I know to give.)

The problem, though, is that if you come to those services, it certainly won’t *feel* like salvation. But that puts us right where the crowds were that first holy week. They wanted salvation, which meant freedom from Rome. But that’s not what they got. Instead, they got a man who had supper with his friends and then went and prayed in a garden. So is that what salvation looks like? It wasn’t for them, so they shouted “Crucify him.”

So there is a risk coming to Holy Week services. You might come and say “Hmm. This sure doesn’t look like salvation to me.”

So what *does* salvation look like? In both the Palm Sunday and all of the events of this week, even up to the cross, one of the strands that I have always clung to for comfort is the notion that this story has to do with God being with us. How? It’s a mystery, to be sure, but I think at least part of the answer involves a God who would stoop to step right into the messiest parts of life with us.³

Fred Craddock, a marvelous preacher and New Testament scholar writes with elegant simplicity how this works. He describes that most-common human occurrence: a child falls down and skins a knee or elbow and comes running to mother.

The mother picks up the child and says—in the oldest myth in the world—
“Let me kiss it and make it well.” ... She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well. Did her kiss make it well? No, it was that ten minutes in her lap. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying, “Mother, why are you crying? I’m the one who hurt my elbow.”
“Because you hurt,” the mother says, “I hurt.” That does more for the child than all the bandages and medicine in the world, just sitting in her lap.”

“What is the cross?” Craddock asks. “Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes in the lap of God, who hurts because you hurt.”⁴

Do you see what I mean? God could just stay removed from us. That’s what the Greeks thought. That’s what Aristotle thought. God just stays up there, and doesn’t bother to come down to be with us, especially in our hurts. But if this week means anything, it is that God comes to us, even ... especially ... in those places that hurt the most.

Here’s another way it all works. Haven’t you heard our whole community shout out “Save us?” over the past few weeks. Save us from the violence that is so embedded in our lives. Save us from despair. Save us from our fear. Save us from our fragmentation, our divisiveness. And so on about 5 days notice we planned a worship service, a memorial service of sorts, but a healing service; not knowing if anyone would really want to come out on a Wednesday evening to an African-American church during such a busy time.

And we got to Mississippi Boulevard, and the church filled up. Kept on filling up, they even had to open up the balcony. Over 2000 people with the desperate pleas of “Hosanna! Save us.” And we sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness” like it has never been sung before. And we heard Kenneth Robinson, an AME Zion pastor lead us in a litany: “Weep today; work tomorrow.” We heard Isaiah’s vision of what God desires for the city, “They shall not bear children for terror but shall be blessed by God.” We heard a professor of criminology “preach” on what we can do to fight crime. He reminded us of the power of the media to shape our fears. Violent crime has actually gone down 18% over the past two years! But he let us know that there are ways to make a difference. They’ve studied crime statistics in every community in the country, but it’s up to us.

We heard Frank Thomas remind us of how good “good” is, and if we want to overcome evil, we have to claim the good in “good.” We heard the choir belt out gospel hymns with heart and voice. And then at the end, Rabbi Micah Greenstein led the benediction in Hebrew, followed by Greg Diaz in Spanish, and then Johnny Jeffords in English.

And I was doing okay until I saw some young Latino men and women and children coming forward. You see, the Hispanic community had fears about coming. There had been rumors circulating on blogs that the murders were caused by a Latino gang. But they came to the service anyway. And Greg explained that in their culture, when you went to someone’s house, you

brought a gift. And so as about a hundred clergy came up on the stage to close the evening, there they were, these faithful Hispanic Christians who had overcome fear, coming down the aisles and placing flowers on the altar. But if truth be known, the real goose bumps came as I looked out over that crowd and saw so many of you. I knew that I wasn't alone up there.

And I knew that Idlewild had already established a creative presence in Binghamton. We have a group of very faithful members who have started some gardening projects over their with the community.

And it's impossible to describe the power of that moment. I felt ... sort of ... well ... saved. Saved from despair. Saved from fear. Saved from loneliness. Saved.

Do you know that feeling? It might have been a time when a friend approached you in a time of great need. Or maybe it was just knowing that a community was praying for you. Those are the kind of events that smack of the holy. And that is, at least in part, how God saves us. God doesn't email us from up on high saying "By the way, you're saved." God comes to us. God steps out of grandeur to stand with us in those really awful, messy times of our lives. We sit in the lap of God and God hears our cries of "Hosanna" in ways so utterly unexpected that we have a hard time believing it is actually true.

So maybe its OK to focus on the "Hosannas" today. For I don't know if there is any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey this week than to reach down in the depths of our souls, those deep, honest places within us and cry "Hosanna. Save us. Please, dear God, save us." Then, and only then, can be join the walk to Gethsemane.

You are invited to join us. You might be surprised at the response.

Amen.

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[return to top](#)

[click endnote to return to text](#)

¹ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2005. P. 140.

² This was from a sermon that Scott Black Johnston, pastor of the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, preached at the Montreat Worship and Music Conference in June, 2007.

³ Ibid. Taken from notes.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Cherry Log Sermons*, "Why the Cross?". Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001, p. 82-83.

Matthew 21:1-11

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2** 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. **3** If anyone says anything to you, just say this, “The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” **4** This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, **5** ”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.” **6** The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; **7** they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. **8** A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** 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!” **10** When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” **11** The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

[return to top](#)