

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion**April 5, 2020**

The Lessons: Matthew 21:1-9
 Isaiah 50:4-9a
 Philippians 2:5-11
 Matthew 26:1-27:66

The Hymns: # 441 "Ride On, Ride On In Majesty"
 # 438 "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth"
 # 423 "Jesus, Refuge Of The Weary"

The Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Sermon Text: Matthew 21:1-9

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

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Once again, I am preaching in an empty church. It appears that this will happen over and over again for the foreseeable future. While there have been a couple of times when services had to be cancelled because of a blizzard, In nearly 48 years of preaching I've never cancelled church for two consecutive Sundays or longer. As with everything about this virus, this too is unprecedented!

It's sad preaching to an empty church. This sanctuary used to be filled with people every Sunday morning, singing their praises to God and receiving from Him the blessings of His Word and Sacrament. Over the years, the numbers faded until we were only a fraction of what we used to be. Now, because of the Covid-19 virus the sanctuary stands empty on Sunday mornings. Sad, indeed.

This reminds me of what happened when our Lord Jesus came to Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. It was the first Palm Sunday. The Sabbath was over and the people were thronging into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover – thousands and thousands of pilgrims. Jesus came too, riding on a donkey. Matthew doesn't tell us, but St. John says that many of the pilgrims had witnessed the raising of Lazarus and had joined the crowds. As Jesus approached the Mount of Olives and the Temple, the crowd began shouting and singing praises: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" So many people – too many to count! What a congregation!

Our text says that in this way the prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah was fulfilled (Zechariah 9:9-12):

"Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your King is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. "

In those days, when the king went out to make war, he was seated on a strong and fast horse. It had to be that way to inspire his soldiers and to instill fear in his enemies. But, the prophet said that the Messiah, the promised King, the King of kings, would come on a mission of peace and reconciliation, sitting on a donkey.

All the people knew this prophecy. But they did not think of a humble king on a mission of peace and reconciliation, but a superhero who would conquer the Roman empire and restore the kingdom of Israel to its glory in the days of the kings David and Solomon. Maybe others had heard of the miracles of Jesus and come to see more wonders at His hands. Therefore, everyone greeted Jesus as "Son of David," a title of the Messiah. And our text says, the whole city was moved, but they asked, Who is this? And the multitude said: This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth of Galilee.

But as that week went on, the crowds died down. Fewer and fewer, it seems, until on Thursday night there were only the 12 disciples in the upper room. Judas left and the others went to Gethsemane where Jesus prayed and waited for his captors to arrive. Peter and possibly John were brave enough to come to the courtyard of the High Priest when Jesus was being interrogated. But after that he was on his own. Alone before Pilate, alone at the scourging by the Roman soldiers. Finally, a few of the women and John were at the foot of the cross as witnesses of the end. Jesus knew that this triumphal entry was only the first stage of Holy Week. His destiny was to be alone on the cross, abandoned by the multitudes, his disciples, even God. The words of the psalm were some of the last words of Jesus on the cross: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And where were the others? Where were the disciples? They were keeping away from the public – a self-imposed isolation. They were afraid – not afraid of a virus, but afraid of those who had arrested and crucified their Lord. Some, perhaps, ventured out for supplies. And yet they were still the people of God. They had not been forsaken, but their Lord who had been forsaken for them. We deserve God to turn his back to us, but Jesus suffered the wrath of God in our places.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, the crowds shouted "hosanna!" "Hosanna" is Hebrew for "save us now!" It's a proclamation of recognition. "You are our savior and deliverer! Thank God you're here!

Save us! Hosanna!” That raises a good question: What exactly were those first Palm Sunday people crying out to be saved from? From our perspective, it’s easy to understand “hosanna” in light of the cross. After all, we know the rest of the story. But...those folks didn’t know that the cross was the whole purpose and intent for that palm-laden, hosanna-filled procession. “Hosanna! Save us now, Jesus!” Save us...from what? St. Luke in his Gospel tells us that those pilgrims who were singing and praising and raining down loud hosannas upon Jesus were rejoicing because of the mighty works they had seen. Hmm...that doesn’t sound very good and faithful, does it?

You almost get the sense that this crowd was so elated and worked up because they thought even bigger and better things were about to happen. I have no doubt that the people wanted saving, but saving from what? I have no doubt that they recognized Jesus as a savior and deliverer, but savior and deliverer from what?

From Roman occupation? From a life of squalor and oppression? From a life of pain and sorrow? From a life of second-class citizenry? And before we go any further, we need to ask these same questions of ourselves. We, too, cry out our hosannas all the time. That’s what faithful Christians do, right? But what exactly are we crying out for? What are we asking to be saved from? From a bad day? From a tight checkbook? From a strained relationship? From sickness? From aches and pains? “Hosanna! Save me, Jesus! Save me from my troubles! Save me from these crosses I bear!”

And even churches and pastors can fall into this trap. “Hosanna, Jesus! Save us! Save us from low offerings! Save us from poor attendance!” Not exactly true to the meaning of the word, is it? What if those particular crosses we lament aren’t taken from us, even after all our loud hosannas? Did our hosannas fall on deaf ears? Did Jesus not come through?

And this is where faith comes in. For we do know the rest of the story, don’t we? In fact, we have a distinct advantage that those first Palm Sunday Christians didn’t have. We know that Jesus is processing into Jerusalem on that first day of the week for the sole purpose of bringing His Father’s plan of salvation to completion. We know that peace—God’s peace, which surpasses all human understanding—is only realized in the bitter sufferings and death of Him who was holy and without sin. We know that at the end of that procession; at the end of that week, is a bloody cross; a gruesome death and hellish divine wrath and forsakenness for the sins of the entire world...for the salvation and deliverance of the entire world.

We know all these things that those first Palm Sunday Christians didn’t know. And yet...do our “hosannas” often ring just as hollow? Can we be accused of crying out “hosanna” for all the wrong things? Can we still be accused of not knowing or recognizing (or perhaps even shunning) the things that make for true peace?

We know the answers to these questions, don’t we? The answers aren’t pretty either. In fact, they’re rather ugly and stained with sin. The call of Lent is “repent!” Cry out your kyrie. “Lord, have mercy!” Cry out your hosanna. “Save me. Deliver me.” Repent and turn to the sole source of your forgiveness, your deliverance, your salvation. And behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

My dear brothers and sister in Christ: Your “hosannas” have been answered. Christ Jesus has suffered, died, and risen again for you. It is finished, once and for all. The one and only thing that makes for true peace has been brought to completion. It is finished! The angelic proclamation at Christ’s birth finds its fulfillment in Christ’s passion and resurrection. That truth and reality of that angel’s proclamation rings loud and clear for us today. “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!” Here is this peace! The peace that surpasses all understanding—God’s divine and Fatherly peace—is yours right now, in Christ and because of Christ. Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! Peace in heaven; peace on earth; peace in Christ and because of Christ.

In the midst of a crisis, when you, like the disciples are separated from others, from your loved ones, from your usual activities and routines, look to the King of Peace who came to calm your fears and win your eternal salvation.

May your hearts, minds, and souls be filled with this Christ-centered joy and peace all your remaining days, now and to all eternity. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Create in me a clean heart, O God
and renew a right spirit within me
Cast me not away from Thy presence
and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation
and uphold me with thy free Spirit.