

Hosanna! Save Us!

Matthew 21:1-17

April 2, 2023 Palm Sunday *Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent #6*

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When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. He said to them, "Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it." He sent them off right away.

Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said,

Say to Daughter Zion, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring."

The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them. Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked. The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Then Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those who were selling and buying there. He pushed over the tables used for currency exchange and the chairs of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It's written, My house will be called a house of prayer. But you've made it a hideout for crooks."

People who were blind and lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and legal experts saw the amazing things he was doing and the children shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were angry. They said to Jesus, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" "Yes," he answered. "Haven't you ever read, From the mouths of babies and infants you've arranged praise for yourself?" Then he left them and went out of the city to Bethany and spent the night there.

Palm Sunday is not really a parade. It was a potent piece of civil disobedience and street theatre. Some thought Jesus was endangering the nation with needless provocation. The teenagers and hotheads of the time probably thought he was hilarious, while the more cautious wondered about his future. And the religious authorities and Roman powers that be were not amused.

Jerusalem was under military occupation by the Roman Empire. The context for our passage today is Passover in the Jewish calendar and so many people had come to Jerusalem to celebrate with family. Passover was a problem for Rome. To not allow Passover to be celebrated would probably cost more, with a general civil uprising, than it was worth. Yet the festival was a celebration of escape from Egypt, which always seemed on the edge of encouraging of a rebellion against Rome. Imagine those Romans overhearing those supposedly innocent asking of questions by the children that is part of the Passover celebrations around the tables with the Seder meal: As part of the readings, every year a child asks

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On all other nights, we eat either unleavened or leavened bread,

but tonight we eat only unleavened bread?

On all other nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables,

but tonight, we eat only bitter herbs?

Answer - We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the L-rd, our G-d, took us out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm....

These were a thinly reference to events that it was hoped would one day involve an escape from Rome. Since the Egyptian armies drown in the Red Sea, maybe and, hopefully, in the not too far distant future there would be a drowning of Caesar's armies.

So to keep things under control, extra troops would be sent into Jerusalem for the duration. They would march in from the west, and make a great show of military might with war horses and columns of marching troops while entering the city, in an effort to dampen the enthusiasm of any Jewish activists.

The narrative and symbolism from Rome was that it had conquered the world. Resistance was useless. This is how Empire thinking works.

While Pilate and Herod had their Roman "ring of steel" clamping down on the city, Jesus was on the other side of the city at the Mount of Olives.

Jesus made his own entry down the hill and over into Jerusalem mounted on a donkey and its foal. This is not some bizarre circus trick. It echoes the text of Zechariah 9. The triumphant king who comes in peace rides a donkey.

humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey... (Zechariah 9:9)

The Roman centurions coming all had their remounts— their spare horse in case the main mount went lame— up at the back of the procession. You don't look half so magnificent if you have an un-mounted horse tethered behind you.

But Jesus tucks his own remount. And it's only a foal!

And here is one more layer of meaning. Jesus wants two animals, a donkey with her little colt beside her, and that Jesus rides “them” in the sense of having them both as part of his demonstration’s highly visible symbolism. In other words, Jesus does not ride a stallion or a mare, a mule or a male donkey, and not even a regular female donkey. He rides the most unmilitary mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her.

Jesus is riding on a humble donkey and the people who meet Jesus shout “Hosanna!” We are singing and saying it today. What did it mean then? What does it mean now? Today? This week? As I was preparing for this sermon, I realized something new. That Matthew makes it clear that after Jesus comes through the gate and people are waving the branches and shouting Hosanna, and after he goes to temple to throw out the money changers, it is the children who are shouting “Hosanna!” What do we hear?

I read a poignant piece by Rev. Joanna Lee. She is an Associate Pastor at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Here is her Children’s Meditation for today after this week when we have been thinking about the children in Nashville. I invite you to imagine being a child in church today.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem and was greeted by palms and cloaks laid out before him as the people shouted “Hosanna!” Can you say “Hosanna”? HOSANNA!

Now “Hosanna” kind of sounds kind of like “Hooray!” But Hosanna, in the language Jesus spoke, actually means “Save us!” or “Help us!”

So people weren’t just celebrating Jesus, they were hoping that Jesus would notice them and help them. And you know what? Jesus does.

Now, guess who Jesus especially noticed on that first Palm Sunday? Who do you think? It was the children! There are stories earlier in the Bible, that tell us how much Jesus loves, cares for, and even respects & admires children.

But on that first Palm Sunday, Jesus really hears the children and gets strength and courage from their shouting. In fact, the children were being so loud that even those who didn’t particularly care for children couldn’t ignore them.

“The children are being too loud!” they thought.

“The children are being too disruptive!” they complained.

And some very powerful leaders became angry and said to Jesus, “Do you hear what they are saying?”

And Jesus responded:

“Yes; have you never read,
‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babes,
you have prepared praise for yourself’?”

Now, I take that to mean:

“Yeah, duh, of course I can hear them. And not only should you hear them; you should listen to them, too! Because those kids know what they’re talking about!”

So I wonder, why were those children shouting “Hosanna” and asking Jesus to save or help them?

Well, there was another big parade happening on the same day. And it was led by the big, strong Roman army. This army had conquered so many other countries, and at this parade, they made it a point to show off their weapons to try and prove how strong they were because of them.

This parade was not about love or peace or welcoming and helping people. It was about power and the celebration of weapons of war. The leaders of this parade believed those weapons would make them strong and keep them safe.

But those children knew, that we cannot build a world where all are safe and loved and cared for with weapons! Those children knew that swords and guns and wars would not and cannot save us. So they shout to Jesus to: “Save us from these adults who think weapons are the way to safety and peace!”

Jesus didn’t use weapons. He was all about the power of love which is stronger than any weapon in the world. And so, still today, we shout “Hosanna!”

Can you shout it as loud as you can, so that some of the most powerful people in the world will hear us, ready? “HOSANNA!”

That’s right. We still need Jesus to help us, guide us, today. So, keep shouting hosanna. (1)

Our congregation loves children – whether they are here on Sunday morning or are children and young people who play special music or take music lessons here or are downstairs in the Old Firehouse School. And I hope we have moments when we are listening to children and discovering some of the lessons they have to teach us. There is an honesty about children and openness to mystery and holy.

As we move into Holy Week, we hold both the hope of Palm Sunday – Jesus speaking and acting in ways that offer life, resistance to empire, offers a deep love. And we see the realities of violence.

As we come to the final weeks of Lent, we think about the spiritual lessons we have learned from Matisse. Toward the end of his life, Matisse's health didn't allow him to paint as he had before. He was forced to spend most of his time in a wheelchair or in bed. But Matisse refused to stop making art. Instead, he began "painting with scissors," as he put it, cutting paper into fantastic, beautiful shapes. The same bright colors and joyful style – now on an even bigger scale, including murals that covered entire walls.

These cut-outs turned out to be the last major chapter of Matisse's career as an artist – and it was also one of the most creative, productive chapters of them all. He called this period his "second life." In the midst of a wilderness of illness, pain, and confinement, Matisse found a new way to experience freedom, refusing to give up hope for the future.

Matisse is a master of bringing together different layers of emotion and meaning in his art. Take his well-known cut-out, *Icarus* (1947). Viewed without its title, it can be seen as a vibrant portrait of joy, a celebration among the stars. Even with its title in mind, we can take it as an exultant moment of Icarus' sunward flight.

And at the same time, we can take it as a moment of disaster, Greek myth where Icarus falls to earth after the sun melts his wings away. Moreover, Matisse once remarked that he also had in mind the horrors of war: the figure can be seen as a soldier who has been shot in the heart, surrounded not by stars but by exploding shells. Holy Week adds yet another layer, as the central figure embodies Jesus' final days.

This Palm Sunday we say and shout Hosanna – Help us! Save us!
Save us from narrow views of the spiritual life.
Help us to listen to children.
Help us to follow the ways of Jesus.
Help us move through this Holy Week of life, death and new life.
Help us deepen our connection to the Holy One
Help us go deeper and then let that love flow out of us.
Help us be a voice for peace. Amen.

1) Rev. Joanna Lee, Facebook post, PCUSA leaders, 3/29/23

2) 3) SALT Project – Henri Matisse and the Colors of Lent Devotional 2023

<https://www.saltproject.org/matisse-and-lent/matisse-devotional-for-lent>