

Palm Sunday 2024 - Rev Jo Smith

Pilgrims would usually enter the City on foot: so this one traveller was noticeable in that He came riding on a colt. A humble enough animal, but there was something about the man. Mark does not mention Zechariah 9:9, but other gospel writers do: could this be the King, humble and riding on a colt?

The crowd evidently thought so, as the traditional welcome went a stage further with not only the waving of branches purposefully taken down from the trees, but also the spreading of their garments in the way (Mark 11:8). The liturgy became pregnant with hidden meanings - "Blessed be the kingdom of our father David: Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 11:10).

When Peter, James and John were on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus (and Moses and Elijah), Peter had characteristically blurted out the first thing that came into his mind: Let's build tabernacles for you here. 'for he knew not what to say' (Mark 9:6). Perhaps the crowd were doing this here: for who really knew who Jesus is, or what kind of salvation He had come to accomplish? Yet Jesus knew -

Jesus had spoken about His coming death on more than one occasion. Mark 10:33-34 explicitly mentions Jerusalem; and Mark 10:45 mentions the substitutionary character of His death.

Jesus was well aware of what awaited Him in Jerusalem, but was all the more determined to go there. The events of our current passage demonstrate that He remained in control of His own destiny. Every move was replete with Messianic undertones: signs of the fulfilling of scripture. even His approach toward the City from the direction of the Mount of Olives (Mark 11:1; cf. Zechariah 14:4).

The finding of the colt (Mark 11:4) was no coincidence: Jesus even anticipated the challenge of the bystanders (Mark 11:5-6): and no doubt when the two disciples said, 'the Lord has need of him' (Mark 11:3), that settled the matter.

The disciples cast their own garments over the colt, and sat Jesus upon him (Mark 11:7). All was set for Messiah to make His triumphant entry into Jerusalem – but the sequel would not involve the planting of the Davidic banner in the City Centre and a Maccabean-like call to arms. Kings rode on colts to demonstrate their peaceful intentions - and whatever men may do to Jesus, He came to establish a 'peace which passes all understanding' (Philippians 4:7).

Mark's masterful anti-climax is: Jesus entered into Jerusalem, went into the Temple, looked around; and when evening came, He returned to the Mount of Olives (Mark 11:11).

The Cross was already casting its shadow

We know that we cannot go from the parade of Palm Sunday directly to the party of Easter Sunday without journeying down the rocky road of Holy Week. And knowing that....knowing that the soberness of Maundy Thursday is going to come and be followed by the sheer brutality of Good Friday. Knowing that matters ...because what happens to faith that has not had a chance to struggle--faith that has not grappled with truly difficult moments in the life with 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? So knowing all of this, how do we join

in this triumphal entry into Jerusalem..... who are we in the crowd?
Where do we stand? What do we cry out in this pressure cooker of hope
and expectationof politics and power?

As I have thought about this question, I keep coming back to that
strange word, "Hosanna." You've got to admit that it is not a term that
comes up in everyday conversation. If you are like me, maybe the last
time you uttered "Hosanna" was, well... .the last time we celebrated
Palm Sunday together. It is a peculiar word--one that is difficult to
define. Scholars' best guess is that "Hosanna" is a contraction of two
Hebrew terms: yaw-shah, meaning to save or deliver, and naw, meaning
to beseech or pray. So you might translate the shouts of the crowd as:
"We beseech you to deliver us." The people cheered. They tossed
branches from the nearby trees to the ground, and they called out,
"Hosanna." They looked upon this prophet--rumored to be the Messiah--
and they cried out to him, "Save us. Save us." I'm thinking that the
meaning of Palm Sunday hangs on those two words--on that simple
plea. Do we feel compelled to shout "Save us!" to our God as we
prepare for Holy Week?

One Holy week a few years ago I spent time with some Year 9s on a half
day retreat ...and I had volunteered to answer some questions they had
scribbled anonymously on scraps of paper for me to answer. One of the
questions was If Jesus came to save us....what did he come to save us
from? Now because I am an annoying chaplain who rarely gives a
simple answer, I asked them what they *thought* we needed saving from.
The first answer that came back was "hell." Jesus saves people from
hell. Now, I don't think this is a bad answer. I actually kind of like it, but
that is a topic for another sermon. For now, I must admit that my initial
reaction when someone answers that "hell" is what God saves us from is

suspicion. I am suspicious: first, because, for a “good kid,” this is the (obvious and only) “right answer.” In other words, I had to wonder if they were all were thinking: Here is the chaplain; the question is, “What does Jesus save us from?” She must want us to say, “Hell.” It’s kind of similar to what happens when I go to see my doctor, and she asks, “So, how much are you drinking?” and I know what she wants me to say.

Still, beyond being suspicious of people’s tendency to want to tell the chaplain what they think she wants to hear, I have some theological concerns about this answer. It is a complicated thing to ask, “What does God save us from?” I am certain that the biblical witness supports me in this. Take, for example, our Palm Sunday text. I don’t believe that the people lining the streets of Jerusalem were primarily concerned about “hell” when they were shouting out to Jesus. If the gospels hint at the crowd’s motivation, it was that the people wanted to be “saved” from the Romans. They wanted deliverance from an occupying army. All of this is to say, I decided to change tactics with the year 9s. “Let me put it this way,” I said to them, “if God was on the ball, what would God save you from?” Suddenly, our conversation got interesting--very interesting.

One of them raised her hand and said, “Death.” Another one offered that God could really help him out by saving him from an upcoming math test. Then one of the seventh graders said, “Pressure.” And another youth said, “My parents’ expectations.” Then another, shy individual, almost in a whisper said, “Fear. I want God to save me from my fears.” All of these answers struck me as more sincere than “hell.” Although, I think you could argue that their comments gave a pretty clear picture of what “hell” looks like to a year 9.

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, bitterness, resentment. Save me from cancer. Save me from depression. Save me from debt. Save me from the strife in my family. Save me from boredom. Save me from the endless cycle of violence. Save me from humiliation. The crowds cry out...., The individual cries out : Save me from staring at the ceiling at three 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.

In viewing Palm Sunday from that angle, we can begin to see the potential for some real depth in this celebration, for embedded in the pageantry is an appeal to God that originates in the most vulnerable places inside of us; and it bubbles, almost beyond our control, to the surface. "Hosanna." "Save us." Please God take the broken places that will tear us apart and make them whole. We beseech you, God, jump into the water and drag our almost-drowned selves to shore. "Save us." "Hosanna."

The trajectory suggested by the year 9s forces two important follow-up questions. First, after we ask God to save us, we want to know: Does God respond to our cries? Does God do anything to save us? And, second, how does God save us? These are crucial inquiries for those of us who cling to the Christian faith, and I want to take my own meager shot at answering them. But before I do that, I should say that I believe that the answer to these questions (to the extent that there is any "answer" that makes sense at all) is embedded in the mystery of this coming week. In other words, I think that the journey from Maundy Thursday through Good Friday and finally to Easter is the closest thing to an answer that we Christians have.

Of course, the danger in this assertion is that the story we will experience this coming week may not feel like salvation. That is one of the stark outcomes in today's text. The people wanted salvation, which they defined as "freedom from the Romans and a return to the glory days of Israel." When it became apparent that Jesus was not "that kind of Messiah," the people's jubilation quickly vanished. "Save us," they cried, but then Jesus did not set about saving them in a manner that they could recognize. They had cried out to him as a king in the line of David....where was his army? He did not take up a sword and send the Romans fleeing. Instead, he went and had supper with his friends; he went and prayed in a garden. Some Messiah!? It only took a few days for the crowds to switch from crying "Hosanna" to the shouts of "Crucify him." So, yes, the risk of Holy Week is that we'll take a peek at Jesus' actions and think, "Hmm, this doesn't look much like salvation to me."

So what does it look like to be saved by God? If it doesn't look like power and glory and political might.? In experiencing the fullness of Holy Week, one of the strands that I have always clung to for comfort is the notion that this story is about God being with us. How does God being with us save us? I am not completely sure, but I do think that part of being saved involves a God who would stoop to step right into the messiest and most awful parts of life with us

- a fierce solidarity that smacks of the holy.

I have got to believe that this is, in part, how God saves us. God doesn't send salvation in from some suite in heaven's ritzy district. He doesn't use Uber deliveries. God comes himself. God incarnates. God steps out of grandeur to stand with us in awkward places at awful times to experience lifeand even death. God lays down his very life for

us. God answers our cries of "Hosanna" in a way so utterly unexpected that we have to wonder if it can possibly be true.

I wonder... Is there any better way to commence Holy Week than with palms in our hands and "Hosannas" on our lips? Is there any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey than to ask God, out of the deep, honest places inside of us, to "Save us... please, save us"? because we know that our power seeking, glory craving...enemy creating and crushing...political and military machinations cannot

Let us pray.

Holy and gracious God, we need you to rescue us from the depths. Please do what you have always done when your people have cried out, "Please save us!" In Christ's name we pray. Amen.