

Hosanna!

Psalm 118:20-29

Mark 11:1-11

Please pray with me:

On this Palm Sunday, Lord, we shout Hosanna! We sing your praises. We stand with your disciples on the road and look to you for our salvation. Open our lives that we may know what that truly means. By the power of your Holy Spirit, speak your truth into our souls this day. Amen.

We do love a parade, a party, a celebration. And for many it seems that Palm Sunday is a pre-Easter warm-up - a pep rally, if you will, for the BIG celebration coming next week. For many Christians will indeed jump directly from one celebration to the next. Perhaps especially this year, when school vacation breaks so rudely into the church calendar. Many families who traveling may miss both Sundays altogether and everything in between... the high holy days of our faith. But what matter? It's almost difficult to distinguish between the two Sundays—we exchange palm branches this week for lilies the next and move on gladly into the Easter Season. After all, we know the end of the story, don't we? We know how it turns out. Resurrection Sunday is our theme. We are the Easter People, after all. We have an empty cross. Why in the world would we want to acknowledge the pain that comes between this day and that? Why focus on the crucifixion? Why would we pause for one moment to consider that this parade is less a triumphal march than it is a funeral procession...? Why? Because if we don't do that, if we don't look closer at the reality of this Palm Sunday parade, if we don't turn with awareness and intentionality into Holy Week, we will miss - to quote Bill Hybels - the descent into greatness.

You know, in many churches, Palm Sunday isn't celebrated anymore. Rather, the focus for this day is the Passion—when all the events of Holy Week are read from the Scriptures. That's because liturgists and pastors are concerned that those of you who skip the events of Holy Week will develop a distorted faith—malformed—a feel-good faith—a faith that has no means to cope with struggle, or pain, or tragedy, injustice or death. So they spend this Sunday giving you get the whole week rolled into one hour, to make sure you do not miss the point. But I'm not going to let you off that easy. Rather, I'm inviting you to be here this week, to journey through it together. To walk the labyrinth, to be take communion on Wednesday, to be here Thursday for the Tenebrae and Good Friday for community worship, to keep vigil in the silence of next Saturday. That's my invitation to you all.

As for today, we're going to watch the parade. Listen for the story as it is told to us by the evangelist Mark, chapter 11:

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

This is the Word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God.***

Now, if we're not paying attention, it might be easy to insert things into this account that just aren't there. Our habit is to conflate the various perspectives of the biblical story into one account—to smoosh together everything we can remember about it, without paying particular mind as to whether this detail comes from Matthew, or that one from Luke or this one from John. We tend to do that. But when we do that, we lose perspective. We fail to listen to the original storyteller and create instead a drama of our own.

If you see children in this scene, you are probably remembering Matthew's account. If palm branches are in your picture, you're thinking of John's story. In Mark, there are no multitudes, but simply "others" - maybe only a handful of passers-by and the disciples. After all, no temple guard or Roman centurions even note his passing. Matthew and Luke both call Jesus the King. In Mark, the unbroken colt and garment-strewn road seem to point to a royal procession, and the crowd shouts out as we do *Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!* But what manner of king is this? He sits ungainly on a colt too small for a grown man - silent, withdrawn, pensive - knowing perhaps that those who acclaim him so loudly desire a victorious Messiah, a conquering King, a swooping Superman, who would deliver them from the Romans. *Hosanna!* They shout out. It means *Save us! Deliver us! God, Save us!* If those on the road could look past their projections long enough to observe the one they acclaim, they might notice the absurdity of this street theatre... listen to the one whose silence speaks louder than their shouts ...

... I am the Messiah, and I will save, but not as you expect.

This is Mark's Gospel and in Mark's Gospel, the disciples just don't get it. They recognize that Jesus is the Savior - they have already called him Messiah, Son of God. But when Jesus explains to them who the Messiah really is—three times he explains: one who will be bound over to the authorities, one who will suffer and die—they cannot, they will not hear him. At one point, Peter actually pulls him aside from the others and rebukes him. "What are you talking about? Why do you say such things? Don't be such a downer!" They don't get it. And when we want to skip from Palm Sunday to Easter morning, we don't get it either. We want the same Savior they did. One who will keep us from pain, one who will rescue us from evil, one who will vanquish all our enemies, restore our 401Ks. We want the conquering hero, the swooping Superman.

The other day, I was pondering the crossroads of life... I was thinking about those times when we gasp at the options that present themselves to us ... decisions that are difficult, but necessary. The route through yet another course of chemo to keep the cancer at bay. The move into assisted living to gain the support you need to live well. The processing of resumes and interviews to find a new job, a new career, security for your family. The pain of departure and change in order to discover new possibilities. In every case, we deeply desire the destination, but how we dread the journey.

Jesus did too. As I thought about people I know in each of these situations, it dawned on me that Jesus did too. After all, Jesus must have been tempted by Peter's rejection of his destiny. Otherwise, why would he have said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan"? And just before he was arrested, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed "Father, if it is your will, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not mine, but thy will be done." Jesus dreaded the journey, although he knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that the destination was real and worthwhile beyond imagining.

I don't really understand, but I know somehow that here lies our salvation: not that God prevents the messiest parts of our lives, but that God stoops to enter into them with us. Not that God levels out the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but that God walks through it with us. Emmanuel. Thou art with me—thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. There's no free ride on the by-pass. No shortcuts or detours. We have to travel through it. Because Easter Sunday without Good Friday is just an empty shell, an easy gig of chocolate eggs and fuzzy bunnies... a celebration without sacrifice. A party with no price. Cheap grace.

Oh, I agree that Good Friday without Easter Sunday is just another tragedy. A meaningless torture. Another injustice of humankind against itself. But the Palms without the Passion are a delusion, and ultimately a disappointment. For in our lives we all experience the NOT YET aspect of the Kingdom Come... that Christ has NOT YET set all things right, NOT YET conquered all unjust powers, NOT YET put all end to evil, NOT healed all illness. And so we NEED a Savior who suffers with us...

We may yearn for a King, the one who sails in on the clouds of glory to rescue and restore us - But we NEED the One who silently bears with us, whose heart breaks with us, who hangs there with us... human enough to cry out loud My God! ... my god... Why have you forsaken me?

So come, join the parade. Straggle along with me behind the cluster of confused and confounded disciples into Holy Week... through the shadows of Maundy Thursday...the dark despair of Good Friday... through the echoing emptiness of Saturday... so that when you are here on Easter Sunday the resurrection reality may come with full power and joy and celebration. But today... today, we watch the parade and shout God save us... Hosanna... Hosanna in the Highest Heaven!