

Sermon Luke 19:28b-40; Ps 118

Palm Sunday

April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Hosanna!

We've been shouting and singing this word a few times today. But what does this word mean?

Often 'hosanna' is used synonymously with 'hallelujah', which means 'praise God'. And many hymns and songs in which 'hosanna' is used sound majestic and uplifting.

But 'hosanna' means something entirely different. A very literal translation of this word would be, 'pray, save us', or 'help us, we pray'. The words 'Jesus' and 'Hosanna' are actually related, because both words contain a Hebrew root that means 'saving', or 'helping'. The name Jesus, or 'Yeshua', means, 'God saves'.

And, by the way, the word 'hosanna', or, as the Hebrew says, "hoshia na", only appears once in this form in the Old Testament, in Psalm 118, to be precise (the psalm we just prayed), and here it's definitely a cry for God's help.

So the people spreading clothes and branches before Jesus and shouting 'hosanna' as he is entering Jerusalem more or less triumphantly are not simply shouting 'hurray', as if this whole thing was a jolly parade of some sort. No, these people implore, they beg Jesus, 'save us, we pray'.

But save them from what? What hopes, what expectations did those people have, roughly 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem?

It is quite telling that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem happens during the Passover Festival, a holy time people of Jewish faith commemorate and celebrate the Exodus from Egypt and the shedding of the yoke of slavery - a time when God helped and saved them with a mighty arm. It is a festival that celebrates liberation.

However, Judea and Galilee back in Jesus' day were not free. The Roman Empire was calling the shots, ruling with an iron and often brutal fist, determining what people could and couldn't do, and collecting steep taxes. The Romans even influenced worship life at the temple, as every candidate for high priest had to be vetted and approved by the Roman governor and was, in effect, a puppet of the Romans.

And Rome's power was especially displayed during the Passover Festival, as all available Roman legions stationed in the Middle East would be summoned to Jerusalem, to discourage and potentially squelch an uprising by the Jewish people – people who are pumped about liberation. Don't get any ideas, people! Imagine celebrating Easter or Christmas surrounded by heavily armed soldiers, who watch your every move and are ready to strike, and you know what this must have felt like for the people in Jerusalem in the year 30 or so.

Into this volatile situation come Jesus, Yeshua, 'God saves'. And the main expectation of the people shouting hosanna may have been the shedding of the yoke of Roman oppression. Liberation from occupation and the hardships that come with it. They may have expected a new king, exerting political power – heck, Jesus even smells like a king; remember last week's story of his anointing?

But Jesus, Yeshua, 'God saves', has other intentions. And this becomes clear by the way he enters Jerusalem: not by the main gate, which lies to the west – this would be the gate that all those Roman legions would march in before the Passover Festival to demonstrate their political and military power. No, Jesus is coming from Bethany, which lies roughly two miles to the east of Jerusalem, and he enters by the small and rather insignificant Golden gate on the eastern side of the city, which leads right to the temple. Which is where Jesus goes immediately after he enters the city. And, if you are halfway familiar with the story, you know what happens next (according to Mark, Matthew, and Luke): Jesus drives out the merchants and moneychangers. Jesus doesn't upset the political system – Jesus makes an effort to restore God's house as a place of pure worship. Jesus doesn't save the people FROM the Romans; Jesus rather saves FOR something that transcends and surpasses any communal or political structure here on earth – the kingdom or realm of God, a realm that already sprouts and grows in the here and now where we follow God's commandment of radical love.

I am certain that Jesus confuses the people who so fervently beg him to save them. That they even are turned off when he doesn't fulfill their expectations. I mean, there is a reason why all those folks are nowhere to be found when Jesus is crucified, and seemingly defeated by the system. Not even his disciples want to be associated with him in his hour of shame and death.

Most of them – except for some women followers – just can't understand that Jesus' saving action applies to a vision that is so much bigger than any political system here on earth. It is a vision that is so much bigger than Christianity draped

in a national flag – or a political system adorned with the cross. It seems that many disciples back then – but then also many disciples today – can't understand that the kingdom of God does not apply to any particular group or region or country, but all of creation. That the end goal is reconciliation and peace and justice for all. If we don't strive to live into this grand vision of God, we will continue to be plagued by the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, envy, lust, wrath, gluttony, and sloth, and all the unrest and injustice and hatred and indifference and warring that come from and with them.

So think about it for just a moment: what expectations do you have today when you cry out 'hosanna – save us, we pray'? What do we need to be saved from?

I'm sure some of you think of certain leaders right now, maybe people or groups that don't align with our opinion. And I fall into that trap as well. But what about the things we just buried and put into the tomb? Those are at the core of human behavior that is destructive and lead to the ways of death rather than life. These are the things that creep into our hearts and our actions.

Father Larry Duncklee in his very profound reflection during the Lenten midweek service last Wednesday reminded those assembled – and reminded me, and, believe me, I need reminding as well – that we are still mandated to love those we may not like very much (or not at all). Not because of them – but because we love God, who, after all, created them in God's own image. That doesn't mean we condone what people do. No, we still have to speak up and act up when we experience injustice. Now that would be quite an appropriate use of the much abused moniker, 'Love the sinner, hate the sin.'

And speaking about sin – I truly believe that this is what we need to be saved from primarily. Now 'sin' is not a very popular word these days. But it is still relevant. As I mentioned it before, Martin Luther has this amazing definition of sin, being 'curved into ourselves' – and because we gaze at our own navel in this position, we don't see what's going on around us. We don't see or care about our neighbor. We don't see or care about God. We serve our own interests first – and not only as individuals, but as communities, even nations, as well.

And note that salvation is a collective thing, not just the saving of my individual soul, or life, or interests. Hosanna means, 'save **us**, we pray!' We are in this together, as the human race, as creation. And if we look at the state of this nation and the world, it seems we need to be saved from ourselves and our collective

ways of death – ways that lead in the opposite direction of life to the fullest for all in the kingdom of heaven.

In the end, only God knows fully what we need saving from. The more the reason for us to open the gates to our hearts wide and cast our often quite selfish expectations aside and let Jesus in as we shout, beg, implore, beseech, ‘hosanna! Pray, save us, Jesus!’ – YOUR kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven! May YOUR justice and peace prevail – now and forever.

Amen