

"Hosanna!"
April 5, 2020 (Palm Sunday)
St. Paul's UCC Church
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Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus 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.

On this Palm Sunday, as we celebrate and shout our loud *Hosanna's*, I invite you to go back in time with me, about 2000 years, to the day where this all began.

It's Passover in the holy city of Jerusalem, and the city is *bustling!* Imagine with me, Church: the city streets teeming with colorful citizens from every corner of the Empire, speaking a dozen languages, shopping and sightseeing. The magnificent Temple at the center of the city, golden and glowing. The rich aroma of lamb roasting over bitter herbs. The sound of psalms chanted at sundown.

In first century Jerusalem, Passover is always a lively and exciting time. But at this *particular* Passover, it's even more so. This year, there is a new mood of expectation in the air.

Imagine yourself as a visitor to Jerusalem during the Passover feast some 2000 years ago. Imagine what you might overhear:

[whispers from the crowd:]

"Have you heard about this Jesus, this Rabbi, son of Joseph and Mary?"

"Do you think this is the one? Our Messiah, the chosen one of God?"

"Do you think he's finally come to save us from our enemies and return things to how they used to be?"

Imagine with me, as you continue to walk down the crowded streets:

[more whispers from the crowd:]

“Did you hear? They say this Jesus heals lepers and opens blind eyes.”

“I’ve heard he drives out demons.”

“I’ve heard he challenges and outrages the scribes and Pharisees.”

“I’ve heard that the people he hangs out with, all that riff raff... well let’s just say, I wouldn’t want to be caught dead with them.”

And as you strain and jostle and push to get past the cloaks and leafy branches, you suddenly catch a glimpse of the one who is causing all this excitement! He is riding on a little colt, surrounded on all sides by ecstatic followers, 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!”

The colt; the cloaks; the crowds; the cries of loud “Hosanna!”: there can be little doubt: the prophecy of old has come to pass! The king is finally here. “Hosanna!” you find yourself shouting, right along with the rest of the crowd. “Hosanna in the highest!”

We use the word *Hosanna* a lot in church. It’s one of our best “churchy” words! We use the word a lot, but we often miss its layers of meaning. *Hosanna* can be a cry of praise to God, sort of like “Glory” or “Hallelujah,” but it can also mean “SAVE US NOW.” In other words, the cry of *Hosanna* can also be the impatient demand of a crowd that knows exactly what it wants: “Hosanna! Solve our problems! Hosanna! Make things like they used to be! Hosanna! Save us! Fix this situation! Make it better! Hosanna! And do it now.”

Remember, Church: in Jesus’ day, Israel is not a free nation. It is occupied by the Roman Empire, and its people dream of a day when a new king from the line of David will raise up an army and drive the Romans into the sea.

Israel wants a conqueror, a warrior-king. The crowd, with its frantic “Hosannas” and leafy branches, expects someone who is triumphant and victorious. Someone who will fight back. And they want someone who will do it through any means possible, including violence.

So... is Jesus the one?

2000 years ago, on this first Palm Sunday, at this particular Passover, the crowd waves Jesus on, cheers for him, throws their robes down on the ground for him. “Hosanna! Hosanna!”

But, as it turns out, this king is not exactly what these crowds are looking for. *This* king’s welcome will end up proving short-lived.

Today, the crowds cheer and wave their palms, but what about next week? Well, next week, Jesus will go into the temple and start kicking over tables. He will argue with the scribes and the other religious leaders, and his authority will be questioned, and he will make a lot of people mad. He will predict Jerusalem’s destruction, and he will make a lot of people mad. On Thursday, one

of his best friends will sell him out. And early Friday morning, the crowd that cried “Hosanna” today will cry just as loudly for his blood.

It’s enough to make me wonder: what if Jesus showed up in my life? Would I be happy to see him?

Of course I would welcome him. If there is any place where King Jesus is going to get a warm reception, it’s with me. If anyone is likely to wave leafy branches and cry, “Hosanna,” I’m your gal. I might even invite him to preach! Of course I would welcome Jesus.

At first.

But I can’t help but wonder: Would Jesus eventually wear out his welcome for me? Would I really do any better than those first century followers did? Or would “King” Jesus disappoint me and bewilder me? Would he leave me wondering? Leave me lost? This morning, I have to ask myself honestly: Do I really want *this* king? Would he really be welcome in my life?

This king is not a suntanned celebrity who travels in respectable circles. This king is most often found in the company of criminals, eating with the poor, embracing lepers, spending time with outcasts. He likes to visit the soup kitchens, the homeless shelters, the teenage pregnancy clinics, the prisons.

Do I really want *this* king? Would he really be welcome in my life?

This king is not a conqueror, one who helps me sort out the “good” guys from the “bad” guys so that I can get on with the business of thinking that I’m right. No. *This* king asks me to renounce all my self-righteousness, the satisfaction I get from blaming and fault-finding. He calls me to costly disciplines and inconvenient practices: loving enemies, forgiving my neighbors, praying for those who persecute me, making peace in a world bent on war.

Do I really want *this* king? Would he really be welcome in my life?

2000 years ago, “King” Jesus is hailed with leafy branches and hosannas as he enters Jerusalem, but he will carry a cross on the way out.

And somehow, I get it. You know, Church, Jesus seems to always have a way of wearing out his welcome. We may let him into Jerusalem, or into our lives, or into our church or community, and things may go well. It may be all palm branches and loud “Hosannas.” At first. But pretty soon, Jesus will begin to make us uncomfortable. Pretty soon, Jesus is calling us to disciplines we don’t want to practice. Pretty soon, Jesus is disrupting our lives – asking us to make tough decisions, telling us to love people we don’t really want to love do things we really don’t want to do.

When Jesus stops behaving the way we want him to behave – when he stops being the kind of king we thought he was – we have two options. We can drive him away, to the outskirts of town, to a hill called Golgotha, to the hard wood of a Roman cross.

Or... we can stay with him, through the desertions on Thursday, to the sorrows on Friday, through the silence of Saturday, to what lies beyond...