

Caught in the Middle
Mark 11:1-11/Mark 14:1-10/Mark 15:1-15

"Hosanna, blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!" What a strange word. What exactly does that word – Hosanna – mean? It is not a typical way of introducing Jesus. And, if you are like me, the last time you uttered "Hosanna" was, well... a year ago, last Palm Sunday. 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 new, 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 Palm trees to the ground, and they called out, "Save us. Deliver us". They looked upon this prophet – rumoured to be the Messiah – and they cried out to him, "Save us. Save us." At face value it would seem that the Jerusalem fan parade is glorifying God's name but they are not really. They are simply demanding their own liberation. 'Save us now!'"

For those of us who are charged with proclaiming the word of the Lord on this the first day of the Holiest week of all Christendom, this day poses difficulties like no other. There is great tension between the palm procession of those celebrating the arrival of the promised Messiah-Lord, AND the outrage, fear and accusations of the threatened authorities. There was a time that this Sunday before Easter was known simply as Palm Sunday and each day of the coming Holy Week had its own place, with everyone reading and worshipping and remembering throughout the week. However, in recent years this day has come under great scrutiny by some theologians. Now, when you look at the Christian calendar, this day is known as "Palm/Passion Sunday." You see, in the hustle and bustle of our world, attendance to week-night Holy Week services has declined drastically, meaning that the Passion narratives are not heard as often and the danger exists for people to actually jump from the celebration of the Palms Parade to the celebration of the Resurrection – leaving out the somber – sheer brutality of the Passion of our Lord. Theologians argue that this leap from celebration to celebration might lead to a warped faith that wilts in the face of hardship – a faith that does not have a chance to struggle – faith that has not grappled with the truly difficult moments in the life of God. Thus today we observe Palm/Passion Sunday – recognizing both the triumphal entry and the brutality of the Passion of our Lord.

So – here we are – caught in the middle of a celebration- caught up in the words of the crowd as they shout "Save us. Save us." They desired to be saved from the oppressive domination of the Roman government. They wanted deliverance from an occupying army.

This morning I ask you the question that a minister friend of mine asked a group of 7th graders – "If God was on the ball, what would God save you from?" One student immediately answered "death." Another answered that God could really help him by saving him from an upcoming math test. Another then offered, "Pressure." Then another young man offered, "My parents' expectations." Then another, very shyly offered in an almost-whisper, "Fear. I want God to save me from my fears."

As you dig down deep into your soul – as you answer as honestly as you can – when you join the celebration – waving your palm branch and boldly cry out, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” I ask the question: from what do you ask God to save you? Save me from depression? Save me from Cancer? Save me from debt? Save me from my anger? Save me from boredom? Save me from the cycles of violence in my home? Save me from humiliation? Save me from my need to control? Save me from bitterness? Save me from arrogance? Save me from loneliness? Save me, O God, from my fears? Save me from my addictions? On the surface it looks like a celebration, but when we look deeper, when we dig down into the darkness of our souls, we cry out with our brothers and sisters of First Century Jerusalem “Save us! Please God, take our brokenness and make us whole. Save us! Pull us from the raging seas of life and drag us to the shore, lest we drown! Save us!”

And of course, that is exactly what we celebrate during this Holy Week – God, through Jesus Christ, comes into the world, into the raging oceans that threaten to drown us – and snatches us up, holds us safe, envelopes us with his love and grace, and saves us. And, God does save us, not in the midst of a parade, rather in the brutal passion of the Promised Messiah. Though they may have tried, the disciples and the followers of Jesus were getting their wish. God was saving them, through the crucifixion of Jesus, the Messiah King, hanging on a cross between two common thieves, with a crown of thorns piercing his head.

And so, the celebratory palms give way to a cross.

This morning, as we sing our closing hymn, I invite you to bring your palms branches of celebration to the altar, exchanging them for a cross – the cross of crucifixion – the cross that will save us. Ask God to save you and know that he does. Yesterday. Today. And Tomorrow. Hosanna! Blessed is he that comes!

I invite you to pray with me:

Come Holy Spirit, strengthen the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Save us, O Lord! As we enter into this Holiest of weeks, hear our cries, send forth your Spirit and create us anew. In Jesus’ name. Amen.