

Todd R. Allen
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Interim Pastor
Passion Sunday

April 9,
Palm/

“Our Shoulders—His Shoulders”
“The Story”: Chapter 26

Text: Psalm 118: 1-2, 18-27
Matthew 21:1-9, and selections from Matthew Chapters 26-27

Psalm 118: 1-4, 18-27

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

² Let Israel say:
“His love endures forever.”

³ Let the house of Aaron say:
“His love endures forever.”

⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say:
“His love endures forever.”

¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD
through which the righteous may enter.

²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.

²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

²³ the LORD has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.

²⁵ LORD, save us!
LORD, grant us success!

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you.

²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.

Matthew 21:1-9

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Good Morning again—and welcome to this Palm Sunday service!

Let me begin today with a confession: 40 years ago I had a lot more hair—and I was also not the most regular of church-goers.

I just wasn't. When Sunday morning rolled around, well, let's just say I was not the most energetic of souls, and—what's more—I thought church was pretty boring most of the time--pretty boring, that is, until a day like today rolled around: Palm Sunday and—of course—Easter Sunday.

For me, here were two days when there was no one telling me to play my trombone softer, for instance—when I could “let it all hang out”—and surely this is what the crowds in Jerusalem did long ago, this very day.

For what a time it was! The Holy City was filled with pilgrims—swollen by over 150, 000 of them, historians tell us—and the entire place was a rocking place because it was the time of the Passover Festival! It was the time—more to the point—when the Jewish people remembered how God had freed them from Egyptian slavery years before.

And this liberation was a wide-screen, Technicolor event. If you've seen the film "The Ten Commandments", for example, you'll know what I am referring to: That image of Charlton Heston as Moses, his arms lifted up, and—whoosh!—the waters of the Red Sea being torn in two like tissue paper by the hand of God. Over cross the people of Israel—but, oh not so fast, you evil armies of Pharaoh! "Bang"—down come the waters, smashing them to smithereens! "This is the Lord's doing—and it is marvelous in our eyes!"—the words of Psalm 118. Surely, here was the work of the Lord—God in action—a flex of the Divine muscle.

Which brings me back, once more, my teen years. How so? Well, then—as now—I am a sucker for history and perhaps you'll remember a television show called "You are There." Are any of you with me?

Raise your hands--there you go...ahh, dating yourself, as well!

"You are Three" was a television show that took you back in time, placing you in the middle of a great historical event. One week, you'd be a delegate signing the Declaration of Independence, the next a soldier at the Battle of Agincourt—I found it all pretty riveting. And so, let's imagine that we are in Jerusalem, right now—that you and I are part of the great crowd that is welcoming Jesus.

What are we seeing?
What are we feeling?

Well, let's say that we know our Scriptures well, friends, and that when we see the animal Jesus is riding on, in particular, we remember the prophecy of Zechariah, made long ago, his words: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey!"

And so, could Jesus be the one? Could he be The One we have waited for so long?!

Rumors swirl around us. We hear reports of what Jesus has done in the countryside of Galilee—his miraculous healings—his showdowns with the religious establishment—how he had put the Scribes and Pharisees in their places—and—just days ago—how he has brought the dead back to life! And so, could this be the One? Oh--surely this IS the Lord's doing--and it is marvelous in our eyes! And so, down go cloaks! Up go the palm branches!

But what will happen next? Here IS the One! But what will he do, now?

Well, again, we know the rest of what Zechariah has written—we do:

“Then the LORD will appear over them”—that is, the people of Israel, the faithful—“and his arrow will go forth like lightning, the LORD God will sound the trumpet and march forth in the whirlwinds of the south—and they will devour and tread down the oppressors—they shall drink their blood like wine, and be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar—on this day the LORD will save them, for they are the flock of His people, like the jewels of the crown.”

Oh, how delicious are those words in our hearts—yes, how delicious they are because we—don’t we?—***who the oppressors are! It is Caesar Augustus and his hordes!***

Yes, here is a mortal—lest we need reminding—who yet fancies himself as a god—and here is a man who keeps his empire in check by the edge of the sword, the tip of the spear. Yes, the empire of Caesar Augustus is an empire where you are taxed to death, literally and figuratively; every day you not only feel The Romans picking your pocket, but you see them stealing and defiling all that you hold sacred—your land, your family—because when you can’t pay your taxes the Centurions—as we know—will take your children away and make them slaves. But there is more: When you go to worship there is a statue of Caesar Augustus in the middle of the sanctuary, just to remind you who is really in charge....

And so, here are the oppressors! And so, you scream at the top of your lungs:

“Hosanna!”
“Hosanna!”

Will you do it with me now?
Let’s do it—and let’s do with gusto!

Hosanna!
Hosanna!

“Hosanna”—or “Yaw Shaw-naw” in the Hebrew.

Where do we get the word “Hosanna”?

We get from two Hebrew words being combined together. From the first word “yaw shaw”—meaning “to save or to deliver”, and from the second “naw”—meaning “to beseech or to pray”—we put them together. And so, what we get? We get a plea for help, friends: “Save us, we pray”—yes, “Save us, we pray!” For this is what “yaw shaw-naw!” means—what “hosanna” means....

Did you know that?

You know, we don't use the word "hosanna" much anymore—in fact, I'd imagine that most of us have not used the word since we were in this place—or in another church—a year ago, last Palm Sunday.

Do you feel compelled to shout it, today--friends?
Do you?

Scott Black Jackson—a colleague in ministry--serves as New York's Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church as pastor, and he's just as taken by the word "Hosanna" as I am, and—not long ago--he met with a group of seventh grade students for a question and answer session—he'd invited them to write down questions on some 3X5 cards—and here is how it went—and I quote him:

"Four of them asked me, 'Is Jesus the only way to salvation?' Being an annoying pastor, I told them that before I would answer that question, they had to answer one for me.

'Since salvation implies that you are being saved from something' I said to them, 'what do you think Jesus is saving you from?' Here was my question.

"The first answer came back. 'Hell.'

Now, I don't think this is a bad answer," Black continues, "but I must admit my initial reaction was one of suspicion because—for a good portion of American Christians—this is the obvious, the only 'right' answer (quote, unquote). To me, it's kind of similar to what happens when I go to see my doctor and he asks me, 'So, have you been exercising?' and I know what he wants me to say. In other words, I had to wonder what the youth were really thinking. If, for instance, the crowds on that first Palm Sunday wanted to be "saved" from the Romans by shouting "Hosanna!", I had to wonder what they wanted to be saved from. And so, I changed tactics. 'If God were on the ball,' I asked them, 'What would God save you from?'—and now, suddenly, our conversation got interesting.'

One of the youth raised her hand and said 'Death.' Another suggested that God could really help him out by saving him from an upcoming math test. One of them said, 'Pressure.' And then another said 'My parent's expectations.' Then finally another—very shy individual said—almost in a whisper: 'Fear. I want God to save me from my fears.'

All of these answers struck me as more sincere than 'Hell'--and I think I could argue that their comments gave me a pretty good idea of what hell looks like to a seventh grader these days."

Unquote.....

What do you want to be saved from?

Palm Sunday is the day to dip down into your souls, friends—it's our day to be as honest as those young people were.

And so, what do you really want God to save you from?

Anger?
Cancer?
Depression?
Debt?
Strife in your family?
Boredom?
Violence?
Humiliation?
Bitterness?
Loneliness?

Here's the start of my list.
What's on yours?

Today is the day to make your list, friends, and today is the day—of all days—to know that God hears your prayers to be saved—indeed, that God has acted to deliver you, for I would direct your attention to the Lord's Table, over here--and it's an image that brings us back the "You are There" moment, mentioned earlier, back to the question of "what will happen next?", raised over the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem, years ago....

What do we think of this table?

It may not look like salvation to us. It will not call to mind, for instance a glorious military campaign waged by Jesus against the Romans, long ago—that act of judgment longed for by so many who watched Him enter in the Holy City—in fact, many of the same people who yell "Hosanna" on that day will have nothing to do with Jesus only days later, friends, because he will be such a great disappointment--for what will he do?

Well, what does Chapter 26 in “The Story” show us?

Jesus will not take up the sword. He will not send the Romans fleeing. No, instead he will share a meal with his disciples, will wash their feet like a slave—and then he will go into a garden to pray.

“Some Messiah!” they will complain. *“This doesn’t look much like salvation—and this man says he is the Son of God! Blasphemer! Away with him—away with him—crucify him!”*

Yes, if we were there, this is what we would have heard—maybe what we may have even say, as well.....

What does it look like to be saved by God?

It won’t take the shape of God saving you from that dreaded math test, if you’re still a seventh grade student
lit won’t take the shape of God sparing you from all the ups and downs of this economy, either.

But I think Scott gets to the heart of it when he shares this story, and I quote him again:

“Eleven years ago, I was standing in the Dresser/Methven Funeral Home in Mora, Minnesota. Outside the snow was swirling, and the local radio station was predicting white-outs on the road, while inside I was pacing up and down, trying to make small talk with old family friends from a town that is no longer my home.

The most significant presence in the room was my Dad. He was laid out in an oak casket, dressed in the blue suit and Black Watch tartan tie my brother and I had picked out.

My mind was reeling. It was filled with the kind of crazy mixture of emotions that being in the presence of a dead loved one brings; in fact, I wasn’t sure whether I could stand being in that space any longer but I knew I had to be there.

And then it happened: At precisely this moment two members of my congregation—Ann and Bob—walked in. My mind couldn’t square their presence with my location—with where I was. I looked away—and I looked back, but there they were, two representatives from the Christian household.

It is impossible to describe the power of that moment: I felt saved.

What does it look like to be saved by God?

It means we will not be spared what goes with being mortal beings—with life on this planet.

It means, I pray, that you and me will be approached by friends in a time of great need.

It means that God will be us--through them.

And it means that God is also with us, here and now:

“This is my body—broken for you”

“This is my blood—shed for you”

The meal Jesus still shares with us—and His words to us.

God doesn't fax us salvation from a far-off heavenly location. *No, God comes to us, instead. God steps out of His grandeur to stand with us in all the awkward—and the awful—times. God answers our cries of “Hosanna”—save us!--and He does so in ways so unexpected, friends, that you and I have to take a second look—like Scott did—to see if it can possibly be true.*

Ahead lies Holy Week.

There is no better way to start this week than with our palms this Sunday, and with “Hosanna” on our lips: *Let us ask God—out of the deep, honest places inside of us—to “save us”*

And let us be assured that whatever weighs us down—whatever rests upon our shoulders—rests upon God's shoulders, too...

Amen—and Amen!

I express my sincere appreciation to Scott Black Jackson for his kind permission to share his thoughts on what it means to be saved by God. Blessings on you and yours, Scott.