**“Hosanna In the Highest”** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Palm/Passion Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40 Saint Paul, Minnesota
April 13, 2025

Any *Jesus Christ Super Star* fans here this morning?

Andrew Lloyd Webber’s 1973 Musical depicts the Palm Sunday story with a song titled. *Hosanna.*

Do you remember the words of the chorus?

*Hosanna Hey sanna Sanna Sanna
Ho sanna Hey sanna Ho sanna
Hey J C, J C! Won't you smile at me?
Sanna Ho sanna hey Superstar!*

But what does the word, *Hosanna,* mean?

Well, according to Diana Butler Bass, Hosanná is a transliteration of the Hebrew term (hôsî-âh-na) meaning "Oh, save now!" or "Please save!"

In other words the crowd at the procession weren't shouting praises to Jesus. *The crowd was begging Jesus to save them.*

And that raises an interesting question, *from what?*

As I’ve shared with you before, in 2006, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg published *The Last Week.* The book begins with an unforgettable image:

*"Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. . . One a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial calvary and soldiers.*

*Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire."*

Luke tells us that they are shouting *blessings.* But Matthew depicts the throng cheering, waving branches, and singing hosanna. The author interlaced the Jesus procession with a prophecy from Zechariah. In the Hebrew scriptures, Zechariah envisioned a humble king who arrived in Jerusalem on donkey and a colt. That king will end all war. There would be no more chariots, warhorses, or battle-bows. The king will command *peace.*

Of course, Pontius Pilate wasn't a king of peace. He commanded an army on behalf of Caesar. He and that legion were there to keep the peace during the holy days of Passover --- making sure that the Jews caused no trouble for the Roman rulers. As his procession made its way to the city gate, most likely no one cheered him. The crowds hated and feared him.

Perhaps a few paid supporters were sent out to shout Ave Pilate --- *Hail Pilate* as he entered --- to soothe his imperial ego. Maybe a few powerful people in Jerusalem actually approved of him, or wanted something from him, and shouted their praise from alongside the road. Chances were, however, the road to *the west gate* was relatively deserted as the Romans approached. The only sounds were the dreaded clomp, clomp, clomp of armored horses, and chariot wheels traversing the cobblestones. Pilate, in regal splendor, probably longed to be home in his seaside villa instead of in Jerusalem, with these unruly Jews.

Meanwhile, *at the eastern gate,* Jesus' noisy supporters were crying out *Hosanna Save us! Please save us now!* They weren't asking for some sort of spiritual salvation, for a place in heaven, or for eternal life. They wanted to be saved from Pilate, from the legion that was entering the other gate, from Caesar, from the faux peace of Roman swords. They were well aware there was no Pax Romana, it was nothing but misery and death.

Hosanna Jesus! Hosanna free us, we pray you! Deliver us! Save us from Pilate, from Herod, and Caesar and all of the misery of Rome*! Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna sanna ho!* Now, Jesus, now! These branch-waving protesters were begging to be rescued from oppression and injustice, shouting for liberation from the forces of violence and death.

But something else is going on, too. *Think about it.* Until this day, until this moment, until right now, the followers of Jesus had been just that: *followers,* largely passive, reflective. They had traipsed after Jesus all over Palestine.

For example, when he argued with civil and religious officials, they watched, tense and riveted. When he defended a prostitute, they gasped. When he conversed in public with a woman from Samaria, they winced. When he defied the Sabbath laws, they cringed. When he declared that the last shall be first, the first last, and the rich poor, they glanced around guardedly to see who was listening. When he kissed people with leprosy and healed those of broken bodies, they whispered in fascinated awe.

But until this day, this moment, until right now, the followers of Jesus had been just that: *followers, largely passive,* if keen observers of his ways. But on Palm Sunday, today, *a shift occurs,* and a transformation begins. And the shift? It's seismic.

You see, as they enter Jerusalem, the followers begin to assume the roles of *leaders.* They walk onto the world stage of a capital city during a great annual festival. For the first time since they have known Jesus, they take up their roles as *active participants* in the kingdom of God.

Against this display of power and authority by Pilate, against and in defiance of it, the followers of Jesus stage *a street drama, a protest,* announcing this: *their hearts, their allegiance, their fealty belong, not to Caesar, not to the Emperor of Rome--to that pretender god--but to Jesus, Prince of Peace.* On the streets of Jerusalem in front of God and Rome and everybody, they announce and proclaim that their hearts, their allegiance, their fealty belong, not to the Pax Romana--an uneasy peace achieved by force--but to Pax Christi, a peace to which we are invited, but never coerced, a peace which emanates from the very heart of God, a peace that passes all human understanding.

This is the day they shout in public that they belong to God and not to Caesar ... which, in their case on this day, is nothing less than *an act of sedition*.

For the past three years -- from the day Jesus called them from their fishing nets until this moment--the commitment to follow Jesus, it had been personal. It had been intimate and private; but today, this day, Palm Sunday, the commitment to follow Jesus, it becomes *public,* and it becomes *political.*

According to Nancy Taylor, former Senior Minister of the Old South Church in Boston, this is the day the church *comes out of the closet.* This is the day the church distances itself from *the state* and from all *worldly power.* This is the day, this is the moment, the hour, that they absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every earthly prince, potentate, state, and sovereignty and vow that they will and do bear true faith and true allegiance to Jesus, Prince of Peace, Son of God. *This is the day the church becomes the church.* In a sense, this is the day the church is *born*. This is the day we say to Jesus, *"It's our turn, Jesus, and you have taught us well. You have shown us and taught us what God looks like. Thank you, Jesus."*

Interestingly, the story of this *coming week* is that Jesus will still *save* them, capitulators, fearful, frightened and all. Jesus will still save them from violence and death -- *although not as anyone hoped or expected.* By the end of the week the salvation will come when His body is broken *by state torture.* When He is forced to drink Rome's bloody cup. The journey to the kingdom of God, the journey to an anti-imperial kingdom will be marked by a cross*. And Palm Sunday is the first step along the way that will end with a stunning event in a cemetery garden.*

And yet, even after *the tomb,* even after that garden: *hosanna will still sound*. In a week, we may still shout our Easter Alleluias, but the truth is that in our day we cry out hosanna, too, because *it's our turn now,* our turn to show the world *what God looks like,* to show the world *what love looks like,* to show the world *what it looks like to love your enemies,* not only your enemies, but the immigrant and the alien, the stranger, and the other. Show the world what it looks like to forgive those who trespass against you, to forgive the one who sinned against you--who sinned against you--to forgive this one not once, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. *Show the world.*

In a manifestly *violent world,* it is now our turn to show the world, *to show our friends, our families, our neighbors, our colleagues,* what it looks like to follow the Prince of Peace, to turn the other cheek. *It's our turn now.*

In a *merciless world*, a dog-eat-dog and might-makes-right world, in a world red in tooth and claw, *it's our turn* to show the world what *mercy* looks like, *God's mercy. It's our turn,* now, today, to give witness to mercy, to show the world what God looks like.

It won't be easy. It will be costly. It may cost you your life.

It was on Palm Sunday that the followers of Jesus began to understand just how costly and rigorous the Christian life is. *You train for it as an athlete trains for a race:* rehearsing the virtues, practicing courage, training oneself in kindness, exercising gentleness, working at mercy and generosity. *It's a full-time job*, this training and practicing. It is a way of life.

And so, this is the day the church found its feet and found its voice and swore allegiance to the Prince of Peace. May the church be born again today, reborn today on Palm Sunday...in me and in you.

*Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna sanna ho / Sanna, hey, sanna ho sanna! Jesus Christ, pay attention, now!* Wave your palms—and, ask: *whose parade are we marching in?*

*Let us pray*. Dear God, on this Palm Sunday, grant us the courage and self-control to step out onto the stage of life as courageous Christians, as active players, leaders, in your realm which has no end. Amen.