4-5-20 online Hosanna! Rev. Amy Haines

Mt 21:1-11 Palm Sunday

Have you ever attended a parade, eagerly waiting and anticipating who was still to come?

Every year the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade travels through the streets of New York City. And everyone watching at home as well as everyone along the parade route knows who is still to come at the very end of the parade- Santa and Mrs. Claus!

When we lived in Ottawa, Ohio, the entire county would celebrate any sports team that made it to state tournament. So whenever you started to hear sirens and horns blaring from multiple fire trucks and police cruisers, you would run outside, knowing that the bus carrying the athletes would be toward the end of that noisy parade.

Last year at Springboro’s Memorial Day parade, I eagerly waited to see not one, but two units of the parade. Nathan was marching with the high school band for the first time, and Timothy was walking with BSA Troop 7 for the first time.

Reflecting on our own anticipation for parades can give us a glimpse today into that first Palm Sunday.

Imagine the excitement leading up to that Passover festival long ago—thousands upon thousands of Jews cramming into Jerusalem. Men are laughing. Children are running around. Animals are being herded to the Temple for sacrifice. Food is cooking, and the smells of the food, the animals and the throngs mix in the air.

Occasionally you will see a Roman soldier on patrol, making sure that nothing gets out of hand with so many visitors in town.

These faithful Jews were seeking to celebrate God’s providence and care as they remembered how God saved their ancestors in Egypt and led them from slavery to freedom in a new land.

They also fervently hoped and dreamed for God’s long-awaited Messiah to come and give them their freedom back.

The Jews in the time of Jesus hated being under Roman occupation. So their Passover festivals were times of remembrance and longing, renewal and anticipation.

In the midst of such excitement, suddenly there was a commotion coming from the direction of Bethphage.

Jesus, a popular rabbi from the region of Galilee, rides into town on a donkey and colt of a donkey surrounded by a small, ragtag, exuberant bunch of followers.

As Jesus rides closer, the crowd around him grows. Those who had journeyed down from the Galilee region knew firsthand the stories of Jesus’ teachings and healings and miracles, and were excited to catch a glimpse of this radical rabbi now in their midst in Jerusalem.

Someone in the crowd laid his cloak on the ground in front of Jesus, as a sign of welcome that is usually reserved just for royalty. Others frantically begin to cut palm branches and lay them down as well or wave them as Jesus rides by.

A shout went up “Hosanna!”

And suddenly the crowd is echoing the Passover psalm of praise:

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

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Anyone who knew their faith history recognized the symbolism of that moment.

They knew that unridden animals were used for holy purposes just as unblemished animals were used for sacrifice.

They recognized that Jesus’ arrival on a donkey echoed the prophet Zechariah who proclaimed:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (9.9)

Observing Jesus ride into town in such a fashion, the crowd raised their voices in praise, echoing the words of Psalm 118:

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! (118.26)

For three years Jesus had been telling others to remain silent on his true identity. Those he healed, he warned not to tell others. Demons who recognized him as the Son of God, he demanded to be quiet. Yet now, he knew his time was near.

No longer did he hide his identity.

The crowd around him proclaimed with shouts of praise,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

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

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Hosanna!

Some would say hosanna is a cry of welcome and nothing more. Yet hosanna also has a deeper meaning—for literally, Hosanna means …save us.

Save us.

Save us, O Lord.

Save us from the Roman rulers,

save us from corrupt and weak spiritual leaders,

save us from our own selfish ways.

Save us now, we beseech thee, O Lord.

Hosanna is a cry that is both celebrating salvation and yearning for hope.

Hosanna is a cry that is personal and political, public and powerful.

The Jews in Jesus’ time sought to be saved from Roman oppression. Many who saw Jesus’ entry that day understood the messiah to come was to be a military leader. They expected Jesus to march right into the Temple and declare his kingship, not overturn the money tables and be a king who dies on a cross.

Even the disciples did not yet understand who Jesus really was, not yet comprehending that the way of his messiahship was the way of suffering, the way of the cross. Three times Jesus had proclaimed to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to be betrayed, condemned, mocked and crucified. Only looking back through the lens of resurrection did they begin to comprehend Jesus’ messiahship as suffering servant who gave his life so that we could live.

When the crowds recognized Jesus was not going to be who they expected him to be, is it no wonder that later in the week their cries of “hosanna” would change to cries of “crucify him”?

Matthew proclaimed that Jesus’ entrance stirred up the whole city of Jerusalem.

Our city is stirred up today, yet for very different reasons, even as we experience similar emotions of uncertainty and hope, despair and faithfulness.

Some translations say that the city was in turmoil. In the Greek that is the word meaning to quake or to shake. It is the same word used to describe what happened when the magi appeared at the time of Jesus’ birth and it is the same word used to describe what happens when the tomb is emptied at Jesus’ resurrection. Turmoil. Earthquake. An earth-shaking, change the world type of event.

Turmoil is an accurate description of what happened that week in Jerusalem—yet not in the way that many expected.

Where they hoped for a military leader, they instead received a suffering servant.

Where they wanted a rebellion, they instead received a following. Where they wanted vengeance against Rome, they instead received a humble death on a cross.

Jesus knew, even amid the waving of the palms and shouts of glory, that he came not just for his people, but for the world. He knew he did not come to offer freedom from Rome, but freedom from sin.

Historians might say that the turmoil surrounding Jesus ended with his death on a cross that long ago week. Yet believers would say that the turmoil surrounding Jesus continues into our lives here and how.

For Jesus’ very presence is earth shattering, even today. Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us, God’s very presence here on earth. He was human and divine.

His life showed us how to live in relationship with God and with one another.

His death showed us the depth of God’s love for us, a love that frees us from sin.

His resurrection shattered even the bonds of death, giving us hope for eternal life.

Jesus reminds us of who and whose we are. He still seeks to remind us that we are God’s beloved. He still seeks to shatter the bonds of sin and despair that hold us down. He still seeks to offer us new life—if we are willing to walk with him, and raise our voices to proclaim Jesus as King.

Are we ready to lift our voices in a shout of Hosanna? Are we ready to proclaim that Jesus is our Savior and Lord? Are we ready to offer our praise for God’s presence with us through the grace of Jesus?

Every day that we shout “Hosanna” in praise, and whisper “Save Us” in prayer,

we can give thanks that Jesus hears our praise and prayers, and Jesus’ life, death and resurrection declare that God is still with us.

God is with us not only when life is going well. God is especially with us in our moments of suffering and struggle, in our moments of depression and grief, in our clinging to trust and hope when the future is unclear.

We shout Hosanna today in thanksgiving that God indeed saves us.

And we celebrate Palm Sunday today because we know the rest of the story—and can look forward to what is yet to come.

In anticipation of this Holy Week, I invite you to continue to walk with Jesus.

Walk with Jesus through the exultant crowd. Lift your voices in praise.

Walk with Jesus as he shared a final meal with his disciples. Confess the times when you, too, have betrayed him.

Walk with Jesus to the cross, his suffering, his death. Then give thanks that through his death he shares God’s love and forgiveness and grace with each one of us.

Walk with Jesus in the uncertainty of Holy Saturday. Recall that what we are feeling in our physical distancing is a bit of the grief of that day when the disciples felt that death had won.

Then, and only then, walk with Jesus in the glory of Easter morning, and the good news of resurrection joy. Join back together next week to proclaim the good news, Christ the Lord is Risen!

Palm Sunday is just the beginning of the good news of this holy week, good news that is proclaimed for all humanity, good news of a God who loves and saves us and is always with us.

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

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

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Let us pray.