

SERMON TITLE: "Hosanna! Save Us, Now!"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 11:1-11 (also read Philip. 2:5-11)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 25, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

We know the story well. It was the day of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He could have *walked* into the big city as most of the other religious pilgrims did. But the time had come for Jesus to make a statement. So he told two of his disciples to fetch him a colt. According to Zechariah 9:9, the king would come, triumphant and victorious, yet humble and riding on the colt of a donkey. And so, Jesus rode the short distance from the Mount of Olives to the gates of Jerusalem.

Jesus and his disciples weren't the only players in this drama. The people traveling in the front and behind recalled Psalm 118 which says, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Bind the festal procession with branches." And so, the people shouted out to Jesus and carpeted his path with both cloaks and leaves.

Today we think of "Hosanna!" as a word of celebration and praise. We consider it to mean something like "Hallelujah!", "Wonderful!", or "Way to go!" After all, the people did seem happy about their new king. They seemed to be excited about the victory that would soon come. But "Hosanna!" wasn't just a word of praise. "Hosanna!" was also a prayer for help. The Hebrew word originally meant "Save us, we beg you!" or "Save us, now!"

So, this morning, as we remember that historic parade of palm branches, I'd like for us to think about what it means to be saved. What would it mean for us today, if Jesus were to save us now?

1—TO ACCEPT JESUS CHRIST AS LORD

The first and most basic meaning of being saved is to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. The forgiving grace absolutely comes from God, who initiates the act of salvation. But our salvation also depends on our acceptance of the rule of Christ in our lives.

By laying their cloaks and branches on the road before Jesus and his donkey, the people were acknowledging Jesus as their king. Possibly they recalled the Old Testament story about when the prophet Elisha anointed Jehu to be the new king of Israel. Second Kings 9:13 tells us that, when the officers of the army learned that Jehu had been anointed king, they hurriedly took off their cloaks and spread them out before him. In so doing, the officers of the army were switching their allegiance away from the old king and aligning themselves with the new king whom God had chosen.

Similarly, when we accept Jesus as king of our hearts and Lord of our lives, we switch allegiance. We turn away from loyalties to other people and other things. We focus our full attention on Christ and give him priority over every aspect of our lives. As our lesson from Philippians said, our knees will bow and our tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

There are many different ways of describing this experience of accepting Christ as Lord. Some people call it being “born again.” This idea comes from the Gospel of John, where Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born from above, or born again. Jesus didn’t mean that a grown person has to become a baby all over again. Jesus meant that we all need a fresh start, a clean slate, a new beginning. The beauty of Christian rebirth is that we aren’t expected to make this big change all on our own. This opportunity for a re-set and do-over is freely offered to us in Jesus Christ. All we have to do is claim it.

Besides the idea of being “born again,” the Bible gives many other images of the salvation we receive through accepting Jesus Christ as Lord. The parable of the Prodigal Son paints the picture of a sinful and rebellious young man who repents and is welcomed home by a forgiving and loving father. And the Apostle Paul writes about the importance of “believing in the Lord Jesus Christ,” receiving God’s gift of grace and faith, and being made “a new creature in Christ.”¹

To be saved means we put sin behind us. To be saved means we acquire a new commitment, a new devotion, a new forgiveness, a new outlook on life. To be saved by Jesus Christ means that Jesus becomes our heart’s deepest desire and longing, our number one priority, and our utmost concern. We

trade in our old interests and focus our attention on this one who is truly worthy of our worship. To be saved means that we follow Jesus' example by accepting the incarnation of the divine into our own human life. To be saved, we accept the healing and hope that Jesus already made possible for us long ago. To be saved means we accept Jesus Christ as Lord.

2—TO PARTICIPATE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

If accepting Christ as Lord of our lives is the first way for us to be saved, then participating in the kingdom of God is what follows. To be saved is more than a one-time acceptance of Christ's mercy and grace. To be saved also means continual growth in faith and love that puts us to work in the kingdom of God, making the world a better place, just like Jesus did. If Jesus is our king, then we are his subjects, obedient to his rule, and loyal to his cause—not just once-and-done, but throughout the rest of our life.

St. Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century theologian, once said, "In order to be saved, you must know what you believe, know why you believe, and know *how to act upon it*."² If Christ is Lord of our hearts and our minds, then Christ must also be Lord of our hands and feet. Where we go, what we do, what we say, and how we spend our money and our time all reflect the sincerity and depth of our faith. To be saved means to allow Christ to direct every step we take.

We can see this in the Palm Sunday story. Jesus told two of his disciples to go get him a colt. You can imagine that may have seemed odd and awkward to them. What? Go, take a colt that doesn't belong to us? Isn't that like horse thievery? But Jesus assured them it was O.K. Most likely, Jesus had worked out that arrangement in advance.

In any case, when the disciples passed on the message, "The Lord needs it," the colt's owners respected that need and also participated in the coming kingdom of God. They were willing to share their donkey because they could tell that Jesus' kingdom was better than the current Roman rule. Roman soldiers regularly requisitioned supplies, animals, and even human labor. But they never compensated for what they took or returned what they borrowed. Jesus' kingdom was different. Jesus

told his disciples that they would return the colt immediately. The kingdom of Christ would not abuse its power. Jesus' kingdom would be fair and just, and the citizens of that kingdom would live by those same principles.

Consequently, we who want to be saved can trust that our obedience to Christ will have positive results. We respond to the needs around us not because we are forced to do so like slaves, but because we believe that God is at work in and through us, creating a better world. When we obey the teachings of Christ to heal the sick and proclaim good news to the oppressed; when we look out for the children and those on the margins of society; when we feed the hungry and welcome the stranger; when we recognize that our neighbors include those of other colors, orientations, religions, and ethnicities; and when we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us—then our society begins to look more and more like the kingdom of God. We are saved, and the people around us are saved, because we allow our actions to be guided by the love and justice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The spiritual life Jesus was promoting wasn't just a private, God-and-me religion. Jesus very much wanted to change his society, and thus he was willing to organize a Palm Sunday march to draw attention to his purpose. Jesus wanted God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus wanted people to be kinder. He wanted people to be more loving. Jesus wanted people to care for their neighbors as they cared for themselves, so that the hungry would be fed and the sick would be healed. Jesus wanted an end to violence, injustice, and oppression. His power didn't come through muscle or weapons, but through the influence of moral conviction and divine love.

Whenever I teach a new members class, I point out a section of our United Methodist theology that says, "Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal of life in the world." That section goes on to say that, for our Methodist leader John Wesley, there was "no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness."³ In other words, to be saved means that we take our personal faith in Jesus Christ out beyond

our hearts and our church and into our homes, schools, and workplaces. We take our faith in Jesus into the streets and the public square. To be saved means we actively promote and enthusiastically participate in the kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

When Jesus' Palm Sunday crowd called out, "Hosanna! Save us now!" they probably weren't so different from the Parkland, Florida, students and the thousands and thousands of other youth who marched in Washington, D.C., yesterday. There, and in many other cities across our country, youth were urgently demanding and begging that they would be saved from violence in their schools.

I know we Americans have a variety of opinions about whether or not that kind of safety is even possible and how it could be achieved. Rarely are there any easy answers to such difficult problems.

What the Palm Sunday story reminds us, though, is that the salvation we desire begins with us accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior and continues with us participating in the kingdom of God. That, I believe, is the Palm Sunday meaning of "Hosanna! Save us, now!"

¹Luke 15:11-32; Acts 16:31; Ephesians 2:8; and 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²*Sourcebook of Wit & Wisdom*, (Communications Resources: Canton, OH, 1996), p. 191. Emphasis mine.

³ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, (UM Publishing House: Nashville, 2016), pp. 53f.