

SERMON TITLE: "Hosanna! Save Us, Now!"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 11:1-11
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 14, 2019, 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 story, though. 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 king. They seemed to be excited about the victory that would soon come. But "Hosanna!" wasn't just a word of praise and celebration. "Hosanna!" was also a prayer for help. The Hebrew word originally meant, "Save us, we beseech you!" or "Save us, now!"

So, this morning, as we remember the parade of palm branches, I'd like for us to think about this prayer. What was it the people needed? What does it mean for Jesus to save us now?

1—JESUS OFFERS US A BETTER WAY

There are lots of ways we could talk about our salvation through Jesus, but our Palm Sunday text gives us several excellent ideas. The first one is that Jesus saves us by offering us a better way of meeting our needs. We see this in Jesus' instruction to two of his disciples. Jesus needed a colt, so he

told them to go into the village and fetch one for him. Jesus tells them where it will be and that they should untie it and bring it to him.

If the story had stopped there or skipped over verses three through six, we might think that Jesus was instructing his disciples to meet their need by stealing the colt. With our American western heritage and culture, we immediately perceive that as a high crime against society. In the old West, didn't horse thieves get hung or shot? Certainly, stealing a colt would be considered a breaking of the seventh commandment. Certainly it would be considered a sin.

But Jesus wasn't telling his disciples to go and steal a colt. The better way to meet their need for the animal, said Jesus, was to communicate with the owners or caretakers of the colt. The way to avoid sin was to explain to them the situation. The better way of solving their problem was to tell them how long they'd be using the colt and that they would bring it back immediately. Because of how Jesus phrases all that, we get the idea that probably Jesus had discussed this plan with the colt's owner at some previous time. They probably had an understanding. This wasn't Jesus' first time to travel to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Maybe the colt's owner was a friend, possibly a mentor, maybe someone who had even encouraged Jesus to do this very thing.

Jesus saves us by offering us this better way of managing our life needs. We may not need a colt, but we probably think we need something. Rather than resorting to sin to solve our problems, it's OK to admit that we need help from other people, and it's a great idea to plan ahead for contingencies. We can avoid offense and sin by communicating with each other and gaining permission.

Some of you may have noticed the big Easter banner we put up out along 400 North. Our church doesn't own the land where that banner is hung. We didn't want to trespass by usurping that right. So we asked permission from Dr. Scott Taylor of the Golden Spike Equine Hospital next door. We assured him that we'd take the banner down right after Easter. And he then gave us permission to put it up. Maybe someday we'll be able to buy that frontage property, and we'll then be able to put up signs

whenever we want. But for now, at least, Jesus shows us the better way to avoid sin: by planning ahead, reaching out, and asking permission for what we need.

2—JESUS OFFERS US FREEDOM FROM OPPRESSIVE POWERS

Of course, the reason Jesus needed the colt was because Jesus offers us freedom from oppressive powers. Jesus saves us not just by teaching us how not to sin, but also by giving us freedom from all that oppresses us. Sometimes that means our own personal demons of temptation and trouble. But the pressures upon us are more than just our personal struggles. We also live in a culture and society that is full of oppressive forces and powers.

At the time of this Palm Sunday story, a lot of the oppression came from the Roman occupation. Caesar and all his minions exacted stiff taxes on the Jewish people and constantly threatened their liberty, well-being, and religious sensibilities. If a Roman soldier had needed a colt, he wouldn't have felt any need to explain himself or bring it back. He would have just taken it—because he could.

What we Christians rarely realize is that Jesus' Palm Sunday parade was actually a non-violent protest against those heavy-handed Roman practices. In the book *The Last Week*, which our adult Sunday School class has been reading, authors Borg and Crossan explain the big contrast of Jesus' humble entry into one side of Jerusalem—while at the very same time, on the other side, a Roman cavalry was escorting the governor, Pontius Pilate, into the city. Into one gate comes Jesus, proclaiming the kingdom of God, while into the opposite gate comes the representative of the Roman empire. The authors describe that scene so vividly that you can smell the leather of Roman saddles and bridles and hear the clanging of Roman armor. As they tell it, you can visualize crowds waving green palm branches with Jesus as an intentional contrast to the glint of shiny spears, swords, and shields on the other side. In orchestrating his non-violent protest, Jesus was trying to make a point. He was offering a different vision for what the kingdom could be like. He wanted to save his people by offering them freedom from oppressive powers.

Today, Jesus is still saving us from oppressive powers. I was reminded this week that our United Methodist General Board of Church and Society building is located in Washington, DC, directly across one street from the United States Capitol, and across another street from the U.S. Supreme Court building. Through the presence of The United Methodist Church, Jesus is there in our nation's capital, making his presence known, standing face to face with the powers of our society, opposing injustice against the poor and the marginalized, and reminding the ruling class about the expectations and values in the kingdom of God. Jesus saves us by offering freedom from oppressive powers.

2—JESUS OFFERS US PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

That naturally leads us to a third way Jesus saves us: by offering us purpose and direction. Jesus clearly invited his disciples to join him in his cause. With each step closer to Jerusalem, Jesus taught them and warned them that this wasn't going to be easy. There was going to be pain and suffering. But there was also purpose and direction that could provide salvation for those who would embrace it.

Jesus gave different tasks to different persons. Not every one of the original 12 disciples was called to be the lead spokesperson. Peter was the one to whom Jesus offered those keys of the kingdom. James and John also had special leadership abilities. Others could serve in different ways, like the two who went to get the colt. We don't know their names. But we know that they followed instructions. They did what Jesus asked. And their role was essential to the cause.

I don't think Gary Phillis will mind me telling you something he has told me several times. There was a period in his life when Gary didn't go to church much. He was absorbed in his auto mechanic work and his love of automobile racing. But after some financial and health problems, Gary found his way to First United Methodist Church. I'm sure Gary was glad for the mercy and healing that he found in the Christian faith of our congregation. But something Rev. Alane Currier-Griggs said to Gary really stuck with him. Sometimes what people need, as much as forgiveness and healing, is a place to serve, a way to use their God-given gifts and talents, a cause that gives them meaning and purpose even on days

when their body is hurting. In and through this congregation, Gary has found a place and means to serve God. All of us who were here working yesterday doing the spring cleaning in the yard and inside the church know that Gary is the key leader for many of our important tasks that keep this church operational. But *all* our talents and skills are useful. While some like to tinker with and use mechanical equipment, others are better at pulling weeds, preparing a meal at the homeless shelter, teaching a Sunday School class, going on a mission trip, or singing in the choir. But, for sure, Jesus saves us by offering us all a way to get involved in his ministry. Jesus saves us by offering us purpose and direction.

CONCLUSION

So, it's no wonder the people gathered around Jesus on that Palm Sunday some 2000 years ago. Jesus gave them a reason to rejoice and celebrate. He offered a better way than sin, he offered freedom from oppression, and he offered purpose and direction. Jesus gave them hope, that he was the answer to their prayers.

Today, we join that first century crowd with our own hopes and prayers. For our own selves and for our society, we affirm and celebrate that Jesus is the one who has the power to save us.

There's a relatively new Palm Sunday hymn that invites us with these words:

Rise and join the glad procession! Hear them passing by again—
 All the ransomed, all his children, marching to Jerusalem!
 Look ahead—the gates of splendor! Hear the everlasting hymn!
 Open wide your hearts in worship! Let the King of glory in!

Who is he who comes in triumph? Who is he who comes to die,
 Comes in peace and comes in power, hidden One now lifted high?
 Jesus, Jesus, Lord, Messiah, mighty Master of the grave!
 See him ride, the King of glory! God himself has come to save!*

Jesus is here at the gates of the city. Jesus is ready to enter in. Hosanna, Jesus! Save us, now!

*Lyrics by Ken Bible, "Who Is He," c. 2004, in *Worship in Song*, #3082.