

MT. ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

Palm Sunday

4/14/19

Matthew 21:1-11

SAVE US NOW

Pastor Scott Bergemann

Who Our English language doesn't quite catch it. To us, the name Jesus and the Hebrew word Hosanna sound completely unrelated, but in their original language, they make beautiful harmony. Let me explain.

When the angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of the very Son of God, he also gave her God's command: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). "You will call him Yeshua (Joshua)," which literally means "the Lord saves."

Years later, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the cry "Hosanna" filled the air. Hoshianna—from the very same verb as Jesus' name. Hoshianna, which literally means "save us now!"

How fitting was this shout, this cry, as our Savior rode into Jerusalem. Hosanna! Just one word in Hebrew that was related to his own name, but in English three words of truth that summarized everything he came into this world to do: "Save us now!" As God, in his grace, has brought us to the beginning of Holy Week again, may this cry be found on our lips too: "Hosanna!" There is no word more appropriate: It's a cry to a king. It's a motto for a kingdom.

We can almost pinpoint the very day: A Sunday in early spring, 30 a.d., Jesus set out with his disciples from Bethany, a little village only about 3 miles from the temple, just on the ridge of the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem. How strange that he was going to a city named Jerusalem, which means "house of peace." By the end of this Passover festival week, the "house of peace"—Jerusalem—would be shaking with hatred and violence, the crowds nearly rioting and not stopping until this prophet from Nazareth in Galilee was captured, tortured, and, finally, executed. That's what lay at the end of the Palm Sunday road. No matter how lovely and joyful the procession was that afternoon—with colorful garments and pungent palms paving the way—at the end lay darkness and death.

And Jesus knew it. But his disciples were still in the dark, as was the excited crowd. All of them, catching sight of Herod's temple with its solid gold-plated façade, were much too caught up in the excitement of the moment. Their heads were filled with happy, patriotic thoughts of celebrating Passover in the Holy City of God. It was a special time to celebrate their heritage. Even Jews around the world today often close their modern Passover celebrations with the longing prayer, "Next year, in Jerusalem." And the words they were singing! "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"—from Psalm 118, a psalm that was one of the special Passover hymns, a psalm that reflected on the very first Passover and the miraculous deliverance from Egypt that God provided. What could be more appropriate? What could have been more traditional or more inspiring?

Nothing. But that's exactly where we sense a bit of emptiness in the entire festive scene. By the end of the week, the crowd's mood will have changed. By the end of the week, the disciples will have abandoned Jesus to face his enemies alone and to die alone. The sad reality is that most in the crowd probably cried "Hosanna" with their voices but not with the voice of faith. Is it really any different today? There is so much talk about "faith" in this country. Just about everybody claims to have "faith." But what is "faith"? What does it mean to be "religious"? How do you define "spiritual"? Sad to say, the prevailing attitude today is that I get to define what my faith is. I get to decide my personal beliefs and how I will express them in worship or in the way I live my life.

That type of thinking can even affect God's people too. Look right here in the gospel. In one sense the cheering crowd had "faith," but it became apparent that week that for many people "faith" was only "custom," "tradition," "ritual," "observance." There were curiosity seekers in the crowd too—"Who is this?"—who perhaps also got swept up in the parade. For many, faith was crying at the King but not crying to the King.

A real problem here and in our world today is that people don't see that faith needs an object. It's not just a "feeling" or a "positive vibe." You don't just "believe"; you don't just "have faith"; you need to have faith in something or someone.

And by God's grace, the Spirit has led you and me to put our faith in Christ. We believe in Christ—who he is and what he did. We need to always remember that so our faith doesn't become the faith of the Palm Sunday crowd. Holy Week is an excellent time to remind ourselves of that—with all our special worship services and special liturgies and special decorations of the church. We can't come to our Good Friday service just because we really like the service of darkness (and we really like to place a nail in the cross and hear the loud noise at the end of the service)—we can't come without standing at the foot of the cross in fearful awe mixed with wonder and joy that God chose to do this for us. We can't come to Easter worship just because we should at least go to church on Easter or because we love to see the chancel adorned with lilies (or we like the breakfast)—we can't come without

understanding the power of Christ's resurrection. We must not join with the crowd shouting at the King, lest what God said through Isaiah about his people of old becomes true of us: "These people . . . honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isa 29:13). No. Do not come to cry "Hosanna" at the King, but in true faith cry "Hosanna" to the King.

There's a difference. For to cry "Hosanna" to the King means to confess that he is your only hope of salvation and that without him you are eternally lost. To cry "Hosanna" to the King means to confess our sins and recognize the punishment they deserve, to abandon all hope of saving ourselves or finding some assurance of heaven in our good behavior. It means to come to him spiritually naked and poor and broken and to look to him for clothing and true wealth and healing. To cry "Hosanna" to the King in true faith means to come to him and plead, "Save me now! There is no other way!"

And those who, by God's grace, cry to the King in true faith are heard by him. "I call out to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain," Psalm 3:4 says. In David's day the "holy mountain" was where the ark of the covenant was kept, on the future site of the temple. But now God's holy mountain is Calvary. How loudly and clearly he answers us there when we cry to him, "Hosanna—save us!" There on the cross hangs the answer for our problem of sin—the only answer there is. There hangs Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Crowned with thorns then, he is now crowned with glory and honor. He rode into Jerusalem to go to that hill and die for you.

We cry to him; we cry with our pains, our hurts, our confusion, our problems, our fears, our doubts about his love for us. And his answer comes back time and again: I am your King. He's the proof of God's forgiveness and love. He's the proof that the Lord can help you. He's the proof that God will help you, comfort you, encourage you, strengthen you, and equip you for every good work. "Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy" (Ps 28:6).

"Hosanna!" It's a cry to the King! But it's also a motto for his kingdom. Matthew records that the crowd sang, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" People and nations choose mottos to reflect who they are and what they stand for. Think of America's motto: E pluribus unum, "Out of many, one." It reflects the truth that America welcomes all, the great "melting pot."

"Hosanna!"—a fitting motto for the kingdom of Christ. "Save us now!" Christ's kingdom is about one thing: salvation—eternal release from the bondage of sin, eternal life in indescribable bliss and joy. This is the goal of our faith in Christ: the eternal salvation of our souls. This is the reason he is King and the reason he has brought us into his kingdom.

But who understood that on Palm Sunday or during the rest of Holy Week? The crowd didn't. They thought Jesus had come in riding on a donkey (as David had used donkeys as royal mounts) to set up a political dynasty. Israel would again be as great as it had been under David. Jesus would drive the Romans out. He would heal their diseases. He would multiply five loaves of bread every day. He would bring worldly peace and prosperity. We know many in the crowd were expecting all that, because St. Mark's gospel records that the crowd also shouted, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (Mk 11:10).

But Jesus would say to Pilate later that week, "My kingdom is from another place" (Jn 18:36). No, his kingdom is about eternal salvation and not international peace treaties. His kingdom wasn't about winning against Rome but about winning over Romans—and Greeks—and Jews—and Gentiles all over the world to cry "Hosanna!" to the King in true faith.

And we, as members of the kingdom—we want to continue to focus on that. Christ has called each of us to preach "the good news of the kingdom" (Lk 16:16)—that salvation is free and already won by him. Everyone who believes will inherit an eternal kingdom in heaven. That is a beautiful and powerful motto to proclaim, a motto that gives true hope, true joy, true peace to a world that so desperately needs these things.

So while others—yes, even some Christian churches—look for a golden-age Christian millennium here on earth, brothers and sisters, especially this Holy Week, let us shout "Hosanna!"—the motto of the kingdom. Proclaim with joy what John heard all heaven say in Revelation: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev 7:10).

"Hoshianna! Save us now!" Yes, that's what our King Jesus—Yeshua—rides into Jerusalem to do. Yes, that's what the cross assures us he did do. Yes, that's what the empty Easter tomb guarantees he will also come back to do. That's what the King is all about. That's what the kingdom is all about. God bless your worship this Holy Week. Amen.