

**New St. James Presbyterian Church**  
**Palm Sunday**  
**Sunday, March 24, 2024**

**“Those Who Followed Were Shouting, ‘Hosanna!’”**  
**Mark 11:1-11**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

Of all the days in the Christian liturgical calendar, Palm Sunday is maybe the most awkward and jarring. Historically, the church has celebrated Palm Sunday with excitement and pageantry, with the waving of palm fronds and the loud singing of ‘hosanna.’

And celebrations are just fine—but, uh, what exactly are we celebrating? On Palm Sunday, Jesus approaches his execution by the Roman empire...and so the church throws a parade? I mean, it’s odd, right? Palm Sunday has even been called a “false Easter,” meaning a celebration a week too soon (Craddock). Today, as we enter Holy Week, we walk in the memory of the church with Christ toward Good Friday, so really: why are we celebrating? Maybe put it this way: on Palm Sunday, in the shadow of the cross, should we really be singing ‘hosanna’?

But the awkwardness of this day is matched by a kind of strange awkwardness in our Gospel Lesson, too. Just prior to entering Jerusalem, Jesus was speaking quite a bit, giving his disciples detailed instructions on how to acquire the colt that he’ll ride into the city:

“When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [Jesus] sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately’” (vv. 2-3). While they’re still outside the city, Jesus details everything to do with the colt: where to find it, what to do, what to say; at that point, Jesus was really quite talkative.

But did you notice the stark change as he approached the city? Did you notice what Jesus says as he enters Jerusalem? Nothing; he says absolutely nothing. And his silence here is more than a little unsettling: the crowd is noisy, but Jesus is silent. The crowd welcomes him almost like a king, hailing what they call “the coming kingdom” (v. 10), yet he says not a word; they call out, “hosanna!” (vv. 9, 10), but Jesus stays silent; they say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (v. 9), but Jesus does not speak; they say, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” (v. 10), but nothing.

With this noisy celebration roaring all around him, Jesus stays silent. At the same time, what he does as he enters the city is, well, just as ambiguous and cryptic: “Then [Jesus] entered Jerusalem,” we heard, “and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve” (v. 11). His actions in the city are as mysterious as his silence; in this utterly anticlimactic ending, Jesus—having been welcomed by the crowd like a king—takes a little look around, and then just leaves the city as silently as he entered it.

So an important question to ask is: why? Why this silence? Why—as the crowds welcome him noisily and enthusiastically—does Jesus say *nothing*? If they're right to greet him with 'hosanna,' then why doesn't he affirm them? Or if they're wrong to greet him with 'hosanna,' then why doesn't he correct them?

The word 'hosanna' [ῥοσαννά] comes from a Hebrew phrase [הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא] meaning “save now” (Black) or “save, I pray” (Hultgren). It's a phrase we find in the Old Testament. In fact, one of the verses that we recited in our Responsive Psalm uses the Hebrew phrase: the part we recited that goes, “Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!”—in the original language, we find the Hebrew phrase for 'hosanna' (Psalm 118:25). With time, however, 'hosanna' came to be used as “a liturgical [phrase] for the praise of God” (Black), an expression used in worship meaning something like “praise God.” So, as I explored a bit with the children, 'hosanna' came to mean both “rescue us, God!” and “God, we praise you for rescuing us!”

Why, then, did the crowd greet Jesus with this cry, calling out 'hosanna'? Preachers will often say that the misguided crowd was expecting Jesus to be a military conqueror, someone who would defeat the Roman occupiers—but that really doesn't make any sense. Jesus never had any military support or military resources of any kind, anywhere, at any point of his life; so why would anyone in the crowd think that? And of course, to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem, the most obvious indicator that Jesus wasn't leading an army was that he wasn't leading an army. He rode in, according to our Gospel Lesson, on a colt—a young, immature animal; it's not even fully grown. He was obviously not a military conqueror coming to overthrow the Roman Empire; nobody in their right mind could have thought that.

Jesus had, however, gained some renown, some fame, as a teacher, a healer, a prophet. So, if anything, the crowd would welcome him as someone who could bring some sort of religious renewal—maybe through a combination of healing and teaching and prophecy. Jesus was also known as controversial, so it's possible they saw him as maybe a part-religious, part-political figure—someone who could upend the status quo in the city. In these different ways, as they projected their own expectations onto him, they anticipated that Jesus could somehow bring rescue or redemption, healing or salvation—and so they cried out 'hosanna,' both praying for God's rescue *and* praising God for rescue.

And wow were they more right than they realized! In shouting out 'hosanna,' this crowd greeted Jesus in a way that was more fitting and more true than they could possibly have understood. They may have expected amazing teaching or healing or prophecy or political leadership—but what was unfolding before them was more powerful than anyone (including the disciples) could possibly have grasped.

I think this may be why, in our Gospel account from Mark, Jesus remains silent as the noisy celebration gathers around him. He neither affirms nor rejects their cries of 'hosanna,' because they are at once correct and confused: they're right that, in Christ, God is drawing near to rescue and redeem—but how God will do this is far beyond anyone's expectations or imagination.

In Christ, on Palm Sunday, God is drawing near to the suffering of Good Friday. In Christ, on Palm Sunday, God does not turn back to safety, but instead accepts this last descent into the depths of human isolation and despair—so that, through Christ, humanity will nevermore be alone in suffering. In Christ's life, and especially in his approaching death, God experienced what it is to be one of us, with our fears and uncertainties and vulnerability. And on Palm Sunday, Christ enters into those final days in which he takes upon himself not only our struggles but even our mortality and death. In Christ, on Palm Sunday, we see God's loving commitment to us, for God was not content to be God on high without becoming God alongside.

So when the crowd calls out 'hosanna,' 'rescue us, God'; 'hosanna,' 'we praise you, God, for rescuing us,' their greetings are more true—more profoundly true—than they could know. And Christ's silence is almost to say, 'Yes, but not how you expect.' Yes, God in Christ will save and redeem, but not how anyone could imagine.

Today, when we sing 'hosanna'; today, when we join our voices with that ancient crowd and add our own refrains of 'hosanna' to theirs, we too are offering a greeting to Christ that is more fitting and more true than we can possibly understand. I mean, could any of us really grasp the gift of God in Christ? No, of course not. So just like that ancient crowd, which couldn't possibly grasp the grace that was before them, yet nevertheless responded faithfully to that grace by crying out 'hosanna'—like that ancient crowd, we likewise can never fully grasp the grace of Christ, yet we too can still offer our fitting word of prayer and praise, as we sing: 'hosanna.'

Our next hymn is a chance to do that together, to sing 'hosanna'—to make the song of the crowd *our* song, as well. As we now sing our 'hosanna,' this is not a misplaced celebration; this is not some sort of "false Easter," celebrated a week too soon. To sing 'hosanna' today is a fitting and faithful way to welcome Christ and to celebrate the grace of God unfolding before us—as Christ enters the city silently, and draws near to Good Friday for our sake. Amen.