

Palm Sunday – Year B
March 25, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

Back in the 1970s when I was a young adult and a fairly new Episcopalian, “Jesus Christ Superstar was the musical. (actually billed as a ‘rock opera’) that got most of the buzz. It’s an interesting treatment of the last week of Jesus’ life seen through the lens of contemporary music and intense politics. It probably wasn’t as hot a ticket as ‘Hamilton’ is now, but people flocked to the theater to experience it. It’s brought back every year in some form – this year a TV special on Easter.

The music is memorable. We find ourselves humming along with the title song, “Jesus Christ Superstar” or Mary Magdalene’s song, “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” – or perhaps the one that is about today – Palm Sunday – “Hosanna, Hey-Sanna.”

If you remember that song from the show – or the movie. (still available from the dusty attic of i-Tunes) you know its mood is a lot like today. There’s a kind of lilting tune that hops in and out of a minor key --- hops back and forth between excitement and solemnity. There is a kind of an undertone of sadness and seriousness.

That’s a lot like what today feels like. We began today with a march – a triumphal procession with palms – becoming for a while the crowd that gathered for Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. We shouted, “Hosanna!” like the crowds we heard about in the gospel reading we heard today. And soon we will find ourselves staring directly at the cross as we read the story of the passion together. We will go from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify Him!”

But we began with Hosanna. That's a word that sounds in this context like it ought to mean something like "hooray!" But what it really means is "Save us!" It is a word that appeared in the earliest liturgies of the church and one we still say on a regular basis. Blessed is he (or the one) who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."

Today scripture just leaps off the page. Sometimes I wonder what was going through the minds and hearts of the people who gathered in Jerusalem as Jesus came along – who put clothing and branches on the roadway and shouted hosannas as he passed by. Were they filled with expectation and hope as they chanted, "Save us?"

But what did they want to be saved from? What did they long for.

In some ways their every-day concerns must have been a lot like the concerns people have today in many parts of the world. They were living under Roman occupation, so there was hope to get out from under that burden. The economy was not all that great. There were intense political movements and a longing for a leader who would make things better – a messiah – a superstar. Someone who God would send to save them from all of this. Someone who would usher in a realm of justice and peace.

And beyond that, I suspect that there was an even deeper longing to come closer to God. Maybe a feeling deep down that all was not well – that the soul was crying out for something.

Today is also an opportunity to wonder what we mean when we shout "Hosanna" – save us. What does that mean in today's context?

We probably have some things on our minds, not the least of which are a lot like the people of first-century Palestine. Peace, justice, security, an end to violence . A longing for God that is often hard to put words around.

This has been a weekend of marches all across the country by young people seeking an end to gun violence. I listened to their stories yesterday for a couple of hours and was deeply moved. And in a way their cries to listen to them – to address the gun violence that threatens their lives and their schools is a kind of a hosanna – save us. As a grandmother of five teenagers and a 12-year-old, and more importantly as a human being, I hear those cries with my heart.

To be saved, in a theological sense, means to move toward wholeness. To have our brokenness repaired and healed. My hunch is that we all do some things in search of a kind of salvation that don't move us in that direction. Very human things. Sometimes (to paraphrase a country western song) we look for salvation in all the wrong places. Places that really can't provide it—wealth, power, control, returning violence for violence, to name a few.

Sometimes our very human wants and needs that seem so important turn out not to be all that important. Having power, wealth or control – however it comes to us – isn't a key to salvation.

We have before us a humble and vulnerable savior in today's images from scripture –a different kind of superstar. Isaiah's suffering servant foreshadows Jesus: "I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheek to those who pulled out the beard..."

In Philippians Paul describes Jesus, “who through he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. “

In our gospel reading we saw Jesus entering Jerusalem, mounted on a colt (or a donkey in other versions) in a way that is humble and triumphal at the same time. When we participate in reading the passion, we will witness the crucifixion of Jesus, a type of execution commonly used for criminals.

Where do we look for salvation – for wholeness -- either as individuals or as a community of believers? What is our deepest longing? Those are questions to ponder as we enter into Holy Week.

Now and then an elderly man approaches me outside of Trader Joe’s and hands me a tract on salvation. The salvation described in those tracts is largely individualistic—a very personal and individual way of approaching God, and largely focused on not going to hell. Much of what we have heard through our lives about salvation sounds a lot like that, but there is another way to look at this.

Another more grace-filled way of describing salvation is closer to ‘belonging to God,’ or as theologian Elia Delio puts it, “being possessed by God.” When we’re possessed by God, she says, we know that we are loved deeply and want to share that incredible gift with others. We live in God’s desire for us and share in the fullness of life – and in doing so, also experience gratitude.

Possessed by God, we can love freely and act justly with no unnecessary demands but the demand of love itself.

Jesus, in his life and then on the cross, offered the kind of wholeness that draws us into God's loving embrace and sets us free to live in the power of that love – creatively and steadily.

However we describe this, we have arrived at a week where our focus is on the cross – the suffering and death of Jesus—a time of great sorrow that moves us toward Easter joy at his resurrection. This is a week of pilgrimage when, as a community, we walk the path to the cross together. This is a week to keep wondering what it means for us to long be saved – to cry, “Hosanna.”

What is our deep longing that only God can satisfy? How do we make ourselves available to this journey of faith, this journey of Holy Week and Easter?. How do we participate in the mystery of this holy time that isn't so much about understanding it as it is about simply entering into it?

Let me offer a prayer that I hope you will revisit this week as we move through this holy time. Let it become part of your pilgrimage. Let it become part of your meditation on the mystery of the cross and salvation. Your meditation on how all of these pieces fit together and invite us into a deeper faith and a fuller life. (page 101 BCP)

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen.