

FROM HOSANNA TO “HOW DARE YOU!”
Sermon Preached by the Rev. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
February 21, 2010

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
 Matthew 21:1-2, 7-10
 Luke 19:41-46

On this First Sunday in Lent, we are formally beginning our sermon series focused on the final week of Jesus’ life. You may have noticed that we’ve rearranged the order of Lent a wee bit. We usually celebrate Palm Sunday toward the end of the season of Lent, but this year we are celebrating it today, at the beginning of the season, because Palm Sunday was the first day of the last week of Jesus’ life. That was the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey in the triumphal entry. That was the day he wept over the City of Jerusalem. That was the day he cleansed the temple. And that was the day when the leaders in the temple resolved to put him to death. So that’s where we begin our story today. Next Sunday, we’ll be talking about Holy Monday, and the weekend after that Holy Tuesday, and then Holy Wednesday, and so on, until we come to Easter.

As we follow in Jesus’ footsteps through his last week, you’re also invited and encouraged to take part in reading a book-in-common with other members of the congregation, a book called *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem*, by the noted biblical scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. I know a number of you have already signed up for one of the seven small groups that are forming to study the book together. They are just getting started this week, so you can still join one. Some people are just reading along on their own; that is an option, too. You can sign up for a group in Thompson Hall and you can also buy a copy of the book there. So check it out.

Several of you have asked me why we’re taking this unusual approach to our Lenten observance. One major reason is that Holy Week doesn’t get the attention these days it once did. “Mid-week services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are not as well-attended as they used to be. Many Christians are not making it to Holy Week worship. What’s wrong? Well, your guess is probably as good as mine. I have heard some say that attendance is down because we are simply too busy. After all, the rest of the world doesn’t pause on Good Friday at noon. Our workplaces, our schools, the rhythms of our society are not set up to accommodate mid-week worship...Others suggest that problem lies in the somberness of Maundy Thursday and the sheer brutality of Good Friday. Perhaps the story of Christ’s final days is too hard for some to bear—too much of a downer, in a culture that savors a more upbeat religion.

“Whatever the reason, it’s true many contemporary Christians go from the parade of Palm Sunday directly to the party of Easter without journeying down the rocky trail of Holy Week. [We omit the hardship and tragedy, the truly difficult moments in the life of God. A faith that has not struggled with those may not be as resilient in dealing with its own times of trial. I’m guessing that we will strengthen our faith and understanding by moving deliberately through the events of Holy Week during the six Sundays of Lent.]

“[And as with Holy Week, our journey begins on a high note. It begins with the crowds shouting ‘Hosanna’ to Jesus as he enters Jerusalem on donkey. That’s a] strange word, ‘Hosanna.’ Not a [word] that comes up in everyday conversation. If you are like me, the last time you uttered ‘Hosanna’ was, well...a year ago, last Palm Sunday. It is a peculiar word—one that is difficult to define. Scholars’ best guess is that ‘Hosanna’ is a contraction of two Hebrew terms: *yaw-shah*, meaning to save or deliver, and *naw*, meaning to beseech or pray. So you might translate the shouts of the crowd as: ‘We beseech you to deliver us.’ The people cheered. They tossed branches from the nearby trees to the ground, and they called out, ‘Hosanna.’ They looked upon this prophet [Jesus]—rumored to be the Messiah—and they cried out to him, ‘Save us. Save us.’ I’m thinking that the meaning of Palm Sunday hangs on those two words—on that simple plea. Do we feel compelled to shout ‘Save us!’ to our God as we prepare for Holy Week?

“[Over the years, I have taught a number of classes for people joining the church—adults as well as teenagers. A question that sometimes comes up is:] ‘Is Jesus the only way to salvation?’ [I like to turn that question around and ask the class,] ‘Since salvation implies that you are being saved from something, what do you think Jesus is saving you from?’ [Often, the answer is] ‘hell.’ Jesus saves people from hell. Now, I don’t think this is a bad answer. I actually kind of like it, [but it’s kind of generic—one-size-fits-all—] and I always wonder whether people are saying that just because they think it’s what the preacher wants to hear. It’s] similar to what happens when I go to see my doctor, and he asks, ‘So, have you been exercising?’ and I know what he wants me to say.

“[Also,] I have some theological concerns about this answer. It’s a complicated thing to ask, ‘What does God save us from?’ I’m certain that the biblical witness supports me in this. Take, for example, [today’s] text. I don’t believe that the people lining the streets of Jerusalem were primarily concerned about ‘hell’ when they were shouting out to Jesus. If the gospels hint at the crowd’s motivation, it was that the people wanted to be ‘saved’ from the Romans. They wanted deliverance from an occupying army. All of this is to say, [when the topic of salvation comes up in a class, I like to ask, ‘If God really knew *you* and what makes you tick,] what would God save you from?’ [I get some interesting answers.]

“[‘Death,’ some have said. ‘Sin’ is another popular response. There was an eighth grade confirmand who suggested] that God could really help him out by saving him from an upcoming math test. [A seventh grader once] said, ‘Pressure.’ And another youth said, ‘My parents’ expectations.’ [There was a shy, middle aged individual, who told me,] almost in a whisper said, ‘Fear. I want God to save me from my fears.’ [Answers like these strike me as more sincere than ‘hell’—although, I suppose you could argue that taken together they give a pretty clear picture of what ‘hell’ looks like to folks.]

“Can we dip down into our souls and be as honest as these [new church members] were? When we wave our palms and boldly cry out, ‘Hosanna,’ do we dare imagine what we really want God to save us from? Save me from anger. Save me from cancer. Save me from depression. Save me from debt. Save me from the strife in my family. Save me from boredom. Save me from getting sent back to [Afghanistan]. Save me from the endless cycle of violence. Save me from humiliation. Save me from staring at the ceiling at three

a.m. wondering why I exist. Save me from bitterness. Save me from arrogance. Save me from loneliness. Save me, God, save me from my fears.

“In viewing [this day] from that angle, we can begin to see the potential for some real depth in this celebration [of the palms], for embedded in our...pageantry is an appeal to God that originates in the most vulnerable places inside of us; and it bubbles, almost beyond our control, to the surface. ‘Hosanna.’ ‘Save us.’ Please God take the broken places that will tear us apart and make them whole. We beseech you, God, jump into the water and drag our almost-drowned selves to shore. ‘Save us.’ ‘Hosanna.’

“[Of course,] after we ask God to save us, we want to know: Does God respond to our cries? Does God do anything to save us? [How] does God save us? These are [important questions], and I want to take my own meager shot at answering them. But before I do that, I should say that I believe that the answer to these questions (to the extent that there is any ‘answer’ that makes sense at all) is embedded in the mystery of [these coming weeks. In other words, I think that the journey from Palm Sunday through Holy Week] to Easter is the closest thing to an answer that we Christians have.

“Of course, the danger in this assertion is that the story we will experience [between now and Easter] may not feel like salvation. That is one of the stark outcomes in today’s text. The people wanted salvation, which they defined as ‘freedom from the Romans.’ When it became apparent that Jesus was not ‘that kind of Messiah,’ the people’s jubilation quickly vanished. ‘Save us,’ they cried, but then Jesus did not set about saving them in a manner that they could recognize. He did not take up a sword and send the Romans fleeing. Instead, he [caused a fuss in the temple of his own people and] went and had supper with his friends; he went and prayed in a garden. Some Messiah!? It only took a few days for the crowds to switch from crying ‘Hosanna’ to the shouts of ‘Crucify him.’ So, yes, the risk of Holy Week is that we’ll take a peek at Jesus’ actions and think, ‘Hmm, this doesn’t look much like salvation to me.’

“So what does it look like to be saved by God? In experiencing the fullness of Holy Week, one of the strands that I have always clung to for comfort is the notion that this story is about God being with us. How does God being with us save us? I am not completely sure, but I do think that part of being saved involves a God who would stoop to step right into the messiest parts of life with us.”¹

One of the toughest patches in my life occurred in toward the end of 1995, when a reorganization in my investment banking division left me suddenly without a job. Ironically, I had spent much of that year wrestling with an growing sense of call to the ministry. In fact, the weekend before I got my pink slip, I had attended an overnight open house at Princeton Seminary to explore how one goes about becoming a Presbyterian minister. I felt a real sense of excitement at Princeton—a pull, if you will, toward what I saw happening there—but I was also keenly aware of how far removed it was from my world of wheeling and dealing and high stakes international finance. I remember telling the Director of Admission at Princeton as I was leaving, “This feels so right to me, but I just don’t see how I would ever be able to extricate myself from the work I’m doing now.” Just three days later, I was extricated!

¹ Scott Black Johnson, “Save Us,” Sermon preached on Day1 Radio, April 5, 2009.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the story. In fact, it was the beginning of my greatest period of anguish. What to do? I had plenty of professional options if I wanted to stay in banking and finance. I had a fifteen month old child, a big mortgage, and a wife who had married an investment banker, not a minister. I was at the peak of my earning power; it just made no sense to put my life on hold for three or four years of seminary and internships just to go back to square one in a new profession.

It was in the midst of that turmoil that I had lunch one day with an old friend of mine, a very successful colleague in the financial world, who also had happened to be a Presbyterian elder. He had invited me—a cradle Methodist—to his church ten years earlier, starting me on the road back to an active faith life after a long hiatus during my young adulthood. He listened to me talk about my struggle through most of my meal, and then toward the end he said, “You know, I have always imagined you as a CEO, and I have no doubt that you could achieve that. But you would also be a wonderful minister. Trust your heart. Either way, God will use you.” And then he added, “Your friends are beside you whichever road you take.” It is impossible to describe the power of that moment. I felt... sort of... well... “saved.”

“You know this too, don't you? To be [buoyed up] by friends in a time of great need is to experience a fierce solidarity that smacks of the holy. I have got to believe that this is, in part, how God saves us. God doesn't fax salvation in from some suite in heaven's ritzy district. God comes. God incarnates. God steps out of grandeur to stand with us in awkward places at awful times to experience life and death. God answers our cries of 'Hosanna' in ways so utterly unexpected that we have got to look (a second time) to see if they can possibly be true.

“I wonder... Is there any better way to commence this [expedition through Lent] than with palms in our hands and 'Hosannas' on our lips? Is there any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey than to ask God, out of the deep, honest places inside of us, to 'Save us... please, save us'?”

“Let us pray.

“Holy and gracious God, we need you to rescue us from the depths. Please do what you have always done when your people have cried out, 'Please save us!' In Christ's name we pray. Amen.”²

² Johnson, “Save Us.”