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Mark 11:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

HOSANNA!

Sin and salvation. These two concepts are joined to each other like peanut butter and jelly. Last Sunday we explored the biblical understanding of sin—that sin is more than just wrong actions but is also part of our human condition and part of our very identity. This week, we turn to the other half of that duo: the topic of *salvation*. The scripture for today makes that a natural transition. It is Palm Sunday. And as we heard in the scripture reading from Mark, the crowds as well as the disciples, welcome Jesus to Jerusalem with great fanfare: waving their palm branches and crying aloud, “Hosanna!”

Now the word “hosanna” was not some kind of cheer--like we today might cry “Hurray!” Instead, the word “hosanna” literally means “save us” or “deliver us.” So salvation is the principle matter at hand when those people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. They were crying out with hope and excitement that Jesus was going to save them. And they knew very clearly what they wanted Jesus to save them from. Anticipating that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, they believed Jesus would deliver them from the cruelty of their Roman oppressors. And who could blame them? The Roman Empire governed with an iron fist, economically exploited these impoverished people for all they could squeeze out of them, and terrorized the people into submission. Of course, the people wanted to be saved from that reality! The very first Palm Sunday hangs on that plea, that cry, that hope: Save us!

And what about us on this Palm Sunday? What prompts you to cry out “hosanna” to God? Save me! Save me from my cancer! Save me from my broken marriage! Save me from my excessive drinking! Save me from boredom! Save me from my bitterness over the wrong

that was done to me! Save me from my feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness! Save me from debt! Save me from my fears! Save me from depression!

And our cries for salvation are not confined to our personal distress. Each day the news offers us plenty of issues that threaten our collective wellbeing. As the planet warms and unleashes destructive forces of hurricanes, fires, droughts, and flooding, we face our need to be saved from the consequences of climate change. When our government is paralyzed by partisan rigidity, we need saving from divisiveness. When a routine trip to the grocery store becomes an occasion of violence and death because of a man with a gun, we need saving. We are reminded as we enter Holy Week that Jesus died from asphyxiation, and we are prompted to consider the many kinds of asphyxiations that have threatened our welfare this past year—beginning with the millions of people around the globe who landed in ICUs hooked up to ventilators and who lost their lives because Covid-19 literally took away their ability to breathe, and including the public asphyxiation of a black man choked to death under the knee of a white law enforcement officer, an event that has come to symbolize the suffocating realities of racism within our land.

Yes, we need saving—individually and collectively. And so we join those first celebrants of Palm Sunday in crying aloud, “Hosanna! Save us!”

The cry to God to save us is one of the most primal kinds of prayers we can offer to God. It comes from our places of great brokenness and need. And there is nothing wrong with making that kind of prayer. But, what happens if God does not appear to answer our prayer as we expect?

Those who greeted Jesus long ago with their cries of “hosanna” knew what they wanted Jesus to save them from. They wanted an end to the Roman occupation. They wanted Israel restored to its greatness. But when it became clear to them that Jesus was not going to be that

kind of a Messiah, their cries of “hosanna” shifted to “crucify him!” Such was their disillusionment.

God is not a magic vending machine who will deliver to us precisely what we pray for and save us from our problems exactly as we ask. I do *not* mean to say that God doesn’t answer our prayers—but God’s answers do not always come in the form we anticipate. As we know, despite fervent prayers, the cancer may indeed progress and claim the life of our loved one. So what does it mean when we seek salvation from God? Christians maintain that believing in Jesus saves us somehow. But how?

Perhaps a good place to begin thinking about salvation is to ask ourselves whether we consider salvation an end or a means. Is salvation an end or a means? Many Christians regard salvation as something that ensures their entry into heaven after they die. You believe in Jesus as God’s son and then you get to enter heaven. This approach makes salvation an end goal. Life after death.

And certainly, the belief in our resurrection to new life after death is indeed a core belief in Christianity. But is that all there is to salvation? Throughout his ministry, Jesus spent very little time speaking or teaching about the afterlife. Instead, he spoke at length about the quality of life we are to lead while we are still living. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven *is at hand*, meaning God’s realm of love and grace is able to be experienced right now. Jesus spoke about coming so that we might have life and have it abundantly, right now while we are alive. Jesus taught about how we are to treat one another, and live justly, offer forgiveness, and extend compassion—all of which have to do with how we live right now. Jesus didn’t come just to prepare us for the afterlife; Jesus invested himself in *this* world and its people.

The salvation Jesus offers us is not just about getting into heaven. The salvation Jesus offers us is also a means—the means by which we live a life in harmony with God right now. Knowing God’s love for us, knowing God’s forgiveness for our sins, accepting God’s transforming spirit into our lives is what saves us. We are saved from a life of alienation from God, from one another, and from ourselves. We are saved to know and live a more abundant way right now: the way of love and grace and justice. We are saved from our own misguided understanding of what life is all about. Salvation is a way of living, a way of living in harmony with God.

Yes, Jesus saves! He saves us from our sins by showing us a more abundant way to live. He saves us from the many kinds of death we face—not only our physical deaths but also very importantly, all those forces in life that would rob us of meaningful life right now. Jesus saves.

And as those who are rescued from alienation and hostility and bitterness and meaninglessness, as those who are saved, we become partners with God. We are saved to serve as followers of Jesus.

Often we think of salvation as the gift of eternal life. But what if eternal life begins right now? The word “eternal” simply means “lasting.” Jesus wanted lasting life for you and for me. And he wanted it to begin right now. Salvation is the gift of lasting life—a quality of life that starts now.

We do indeed need saving for each of us, and all of us, and this world we share are broken in so many ways. Jesus’ Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem is symbolic of Jesus’ entering all that brokenness in our lives and world with the power to save. That saving power takes the form of radical love, compassion, forgiveness, service, and justice. We can know God’s gift of salvation when we set our feet upon that same path. Our cries of “hosanna” are not in vain. For Jesus saves! And eternal life begins today!