

## **“Sacred Hosannas”**

Rev. David Gregory

March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday



*The Procession in the Streets of Jerusalem*  
James Tissot

### **Readings**

John 12:12-14

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

The huge crowd that had arrived for the feast heard that Jesus was entering Jerusalem.

They broke off palm branches and went out to meet him.

And they cheered:

Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in God's name!

Yes! The King of Israel!

From *A New Ancient Harmony*

by John Philip Newell

Part of believing in the Ground of being is to name the sorrow that issues up from the deepest part of our being when our child suffers, when earth's species are crucified, when the people and the nations we love are wronged. ...It is to believe that we will find the way forward in our lives and world, not by ignoring or playing down the agony of earth's journey or the pain of our particular paths, but by hearing the sacredness of the cry.

Today is the beginning of a yearly commemoration we have come to know as “Holy Week.” It is a yearly review of the final days of Jesus’s life, culminating in his last Passover, his betrayal and arrest, his execution, burial, and ultimate resurrection. In the tradition we call Christianity, there are three major movements of the calendar that drive this story. The first is Advent and Christmas, which is the origin story where God comes to dwell in human flesh, the Incarnation of the Divine, which brings peace and hope to a world in desperate need of it. The second movement is Lent and Easter, in which the messianic vision confronts a violent world of human empire, a conflict which produces a showdown that the empire appears to win; but does it really? That question stays on hold until Pentecost, or the coming of the Holy Spirit. If the Advent of the Christ Child celebrates “God with us,” then the introduction of the Holy Spirit is the “God in us,” which completes a picture of Divine Being, not living separately in some far-off heaven, but in and with and through us, exactly where we are.

These celebrations which we think of as “Christian” holidays, are really a combination of Jewish festivals and seasonal pagan religious traditions that the church has appropriated to varying degrees over many centuries. This doesn’t make them right or wrong, good or bad, valuable or worthless in terms of our 21<sup>st</sup> century practice, but it does remind us that what we think of as Christianity is more of a religious and spiritual tapestry than a garment woven of a single thread.

Not everyone likes hearing me say that Jesus of Nazareth does not appear to have arrived on the scene for the purpose of creating a new world religion. As we like to point out, he lived, worked, taught, and died a Jewish man, a teacher, a healer, a rabbi, and would-be reformer of Judaism. The term “Christian” is a later construct, created as adherents were pushed as refugees further and further west into the Roman empire, essentially losing much of their contact with Judaism and picking up the cultural influences of Rome. Then in the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine himself appropriated Christianity, and created it in a new image, still reflected in numerous lineages that are with us today.

On this the second Palm Sunday of the COVID era, we might ask ourselves what this all means to us now. This framework of Christianity, especially as it has evolved in the west, is something we struggle with, as we try to find something relevant, compelling, important or vital for ourselves and for the world. It comes as no surprise, then, that younger generations are not interested in the things we cannot articulate or explain, even for ourselves. “What good is this for me?” they might ask, and it is in every sense a valid question.

Ironically, the answer appears within the biblical stories themselves, that is if we can hang out long enough, keeping our hearts and our minds open enough to see it. In the story of the “triumphal entry,” for example, a gathering of tired, oppressed, and hungry people stood along a path into Jerusalem, and as Jesus rode by on a donkey they waved branches at him, perhaps for attention, and cried out “Hosanna!” which at its root means “Save us now! Deliver us! Help us out of our predicament!” *Hosanna in the Highest* could thus be understood to mean as “Help us please, and HURRY!”

It defies the imagination to think that these people were speaking of salvation in a theological sense. When we encounter homeless people at the traffic light, they're not holding up their signs to engage us in a debate on the substitutionary atonement. They are desperate within a cultural system that has failed them. They are hungry, and they are trying to exercise their right to be, their right to be here, and to have what they need to survive. The people shouting on the road to Jerusalem were no different. Their religious system had failed them; their government was in shambles; they were oppressed and overrun by forces that took no thought for their greater good. This is why we tell the story again this Holy Week. It's an opportunity to say once more—with feeling—that our battle for relevance has nothing at all to do with the perpetuation of our religious institutions. It's about how we care for people, how we care for the earth, and how we embody the love, peace, and harmony that is the "God-with-us, in-us, and through-us" that we proclaim with our lips.

This "Hosanna" is a sacred cry today, and it's getting louder and more pronounced. We've played around with this idea for many election cycles, that something must be done to arrest and reverse the obscenity of racial and economic inequality and injustice. We've seen a rise in white supremacy that I wish we could say is unprecedented. It is not. It's just that the restraints enacted in the Civil Rights era have been systematically dismantled. To which the people along the path would say today, "Help us now, and HURRY!" As our friend John Philip Newell has said in his work entitled, *A New Ancient Harmony*:

*Part of believing in the Ground of being is to name the sorrow that issues up from the deepest part of our being when our child suffers, when earth's species are crucified, when the people and the nations we love are wronged. ...It is to believe that we will find the way forward in our lives and world, not by ignoring or playing down the agony of earth's journey or the pain of our particular paths, but by hearing the sacredness of the cry.*

In this Holy Week, I wonder what sorrows issue up from the deepest part of our being when we see children suffering, whether they are separated from parents at the border or living without parents on the streets of our cities. What is the feeling that comes to us when we witness earth's species strangled in a sea of plastic or whose lives are threatened by unsafe water, the effects of greenhouse gases, or a power grid that fails them at the worst of times? What about when people across the globe are targeted for extermination because of their religious or ethnic heritage, or their opposition to a military coup?

The cries are getting louder, more shrill, more pronounced, more insistent. We might prefer to turn away toward things that distract, that drown out, or even eclipse what we're seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling. But this cannot be an option. There is a way forward, and it is in hearing the Hosannas and making them so sacred that that we cannot help but keep walking them—and each other—home.

