

Prayer of Praise and Protest Cry

April 2, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Matthew 21: 1-11 ext to 17

We've made it! Palm Sunday. Parade Sunday! Megaphone Sunday! The day when we hand out pieces of a tropical tree, when we eat sweet hot crossed buns for breakfast and look forward to Easter celebration plans next week. The day where we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, singing praises to God in the streets. Right? Perhaps you too have memories of sitting in the pews of a church and splitting a single palm leaf and attempting to wrangle it into the shape of a clumsy cross to keep with you into Holy Week or perhaps to serve as a distraction from whatever was being talked about in the sermon- which is totally ok by the way. It is true that this day is often tied to this grand moment of praise and celebration, this contrast to what we know will happen on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday this week.

The passage reads...

*A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,
"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

As someone who majored in Classics in undergrad my nerdiness comes out on Palm Sunday. This scene of Jesus entering Jerusalem mimics the ritual of a Roman Triumph, a civil ceremony and religious rite of Ancient Rome. These Triumphs acted as moments to publicly celebrate the success of military commanders' victory in war. They were celebrations of violence and power over the region that Rome continued to consume for their own benefit. And here we have Jesus, entering the city in the same ritual pattern, but instead of a four-horse chariot, he sits awkwardly atop both a colt and a donkey. Instead of participating in theft of culture, enslaving who is left in service of empire, Jesus has brought with him his own community of support to pave the way of love. Instead of claiming that the state held the seat of divine power, he goes to the temple to rid the transactions permitted by the state to make space for prayer to God. He goes to a holy place to heal people and listen to the wisdom of children. He makes a mockery of the control and cruelty that Rome was so skilled at putting on display. Rome

was a place of extremes, you see, and Jesus carves out a different way of seeing by his very presence in the midst of their culture.

Some have said that this story acts more as an illustration of a peaceful protest against Rome's power than a triumphal welcome into Jerusalem. This kind of protest that we remember on Palm Sunday transforms images and signifiers of dominance into a celebration of liberation from violence in all forms. This week in my ear I can't help but hear the chants of young protesters as Kentucky lawmakers overrode the veto of anti-trans legislation this week. The young people chanting: "Trans kids are under attack," "What do we do? Stand up, fight back!"

As we take in the turbulence of this moment— in the chambers of lawmakers and in the streets of Jerusalem— as we take in the arrival of Jesus, the palms and cloaks being laid down to prepare his way, the crowds around him were shouting something, a word that is difficult to capture the sense of into English, Hosanna.

This word Hosanna is often seen as a synonym for Hallelujah, a word of praise to God. And in some ways, it is the same word is used in Psalm 118 with this purpose in a song of praise- but the literal meaning of Hosanna that comes from a transliterated Hebrew imperative means "please save" or "save us now." Why don't we read this word in its translated form as we do for all the other words in this Palm Sunday passage? It's a question that came to mind as I was praying with these words this week. The reasons could be many, including that the translators might have wanted to preserve the sense that the crowds were echoing traditional greetings by pilgrims attending temple festivals in the region. The specific reason aside, when we translate the Hosannas into English, and imagine the crowds near Jesus crying out "Save us," the scene of Jesus' walk into Jerusalem takes on a different tone. It starts to feel like one of those scenes from a movie when everything seems safe and ok visually, but the music in the soundtrack starts to swell and the string instruments begin to play- letting our nervous systems know that something sinister is in the air, that something isn't quite right.

The tone of Palm Sunday and the imagined sound of children singing this word Hosanna, please save us, to Jesus through the crowds, it feels all the more weighty this year— as we are holding our fears about political violence in the coming weeks, of the future of the climate crisis, of yet another school shooting come to us through our news feeds. As we attempt to move through the upkeep of being human- going to trader joes for groceries, making sure our kids get to school on time, figuring out the household schedule, replying to emails, making

breakfast, there is this presence of a dissonant melody of both praise and pleading. Amidst the rhythms of being human this soundtrack is playing for us today too.

Much to the chagrin of many of us in this room, myself included, one commentary I looked at this week said, “there is no exegesis that can rescue this moment,” referring to the beginning of Holy Week. And, there are times in our lives when we feel as if we are unrescuable too. So where do we go from here? We go back to Hosanna. Back to this cry from the crowd for Jesus to save them. I think I’m beginning to understand maybe why we don’t fully translate this word in the context of this passage. Or at least this is a thought for today. Perhaps we don’t translate the word because it’s so hard to tease apart the sense of the word meaning “praise” from its simultaneous meaning as a call to save. It’s not one or the other, it’s both. We can’t tease the word apart. It just is. It must remain whole. In the same way, we can’t tease apart the heartbreaking and joy inducing mysteries of our lives with God either. The sacred stories of our lives must remain whole too.

This scene of procession is a moment of transition yet again in Jesus’ journey in this world. He’s not at the beginning or at the end, but in the middle of things. He is in a way, not able to be teased apart into one meaning for us, but instead holds the tension of multiple truths. With this puzzling word Hosanna, he leads us into the greatest mystery of our faith—the truth in and journey of his passion and resurrection, and indeed for God’s ability to inspire our hearts to hold both despair and praise in the same breath. The crowds erupt with this one question: “who is this?” This person who is flipping the world upside down, who will lead us to liberation, but not in the ways we are expecting; the one who is unafraid to lead a protest in the face of the despair of the violence of empire, the one who makes space for holy mystery and fierce love of this complicated world in our hearts. Sometimes our impulse is to attempt to get to the bottom of what is exactly going on. What is Jesus trying to do by leading this public political act? What is coming from the crowd? Is it praise? Is it desperation? Are they the same ones who will turn Jesus in a few days later or is that another group of people?

As we journey into the days of Holy Week I invite us to lay down these questions in favor of a new one: what might it look like to let go of the analysis and simply be with God and our sacred story for the holiest days of the year? What would it feel like to slow down, to leave the Hosannas untranslated and simply cry them out? To leave our praise, laughter and joy mixed in with our need for the divine in the midst of the tragedies and griefs of our lives. What if this act of dwelling and acting with God was our moment of protest this week? To simply be

with her in this journey of memory, grief, action and transformation? To trust the divine to bring new life in the face of death, confusion, and our very reasonable questions.

Perhaps this is an opportunity to have faith that God will stand with us in our own discomfort and fear. The story of our faith invites us to trust in and lay down a way for God's liberating presence in our lives even in the moments when we don't know what will come of the path ahead of us. Spend some time with the stories of Holy Week this year. Read them as if they are a prayer. Because try as we might, we cannot logic ourselves into the ways of resurrection. Only God can invite us into that kind of transformational love. So, for now God, hear our prayer and protest cry:

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Amen.

