

“Hosanna! Hope on the Horizon”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; John 12:12-16 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 28, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our trust might be renewed in the hope and power of your salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Are you excited? Our word today is Excitement. Sermon series are a good thing, and sermon series built on acrostics are perhaps especially fun. Discovering that the word “ENDURE” has as many letters as there are Sundays in Lent made it seem like a great idea, but one should always check one’s acrostics for vowels. Using “Empathy” for the first E was obvious, since it was the beginning of our celebration of Week of Compassion. It was great to have the D for Determination and the R for Resilience. But then I got to the end, and oops, there’s another E. What’s another E-word that helps us endure? Energy didn’t seem very preachable. Enthusiasm felt entirely inappropriate. Inertia, as it turns out, doesn’t start with an E!

The sixth Sunday of Lent is Palm Sunday. Could Excitement be the word for the final E? Is Excitement what we’re feeling? Is Excitement what we need? Eight weeks ago when we were trying to plan for this moment, it was really hard to tell. To be honest, now that we’re here, I’m still not entirely sure. But there are a few clear lessons this holiday can offer us, some of which might even help us endure.

First of all, it does seem clear that if Excitement is part of our current moment at all, Palm Sunday Excitement is the best description of what is going on. “Palm

Sunday Excitement” as characterized by verse 16, that is: “His disciples did not understand these things at first.” Excitement is breaking through in our lives: case numbers and death rates are down from where they were in the winter, vaccines are coming along, some of us are already fully vaccinated. But the truth is, the buzzes of excitement we feel are still tempered by the fact that we don’t really know what is coming next. We don’t know what variants will do; we don’t know how it will feel to gather again; we don’t know whether people will come back. Just as we couldn’t have predicted where we’d be now a year ago, a year from now, we’ll understand things about this coming year that we can’t imagine at the moment. “Confused excitement” is a good way of describing the dominant emotion of Palm Sunday, and it’s the main kind of excitement we’ve got now too. Hope is on the horizon; it’s clearly there and yet simultaneously, a little fuzzy around the edges.

The second lesson Palm Sunday can offer us for the present moment is found in the word “Hosanna!” “Hosanna” means “save us.” If we want to be part of what God is doing in our world, we must begin with acknowledging that things are not okay. Now, perhaps that’s obvious – there’s a pandemic; of course things are not okay. But this pandemic has been an apocalypse in ways beyond the disease. Another word for “apocalypse” is “revealing,” and this one has revealed a lot. The injustices of our society that have always been there have been laid bare by this past year. Disparities in access to health care; the differences between jobs that easily translate to working from home and those that require the risk of daily interaction with strangers;

the widening gap between students with plenty of support at home and those who struggle just to connect to the internet, let alone learn; the systemic nature of violence against people of color; and now recently, a renewed awareness of the epidemic of gun violence in our society: much has been revealed in this apocalypse. If we're aiming to follow Jesus in the midst of this, we cannot pretend that everything is okay. We have to be willing to make a ruckus, to shout "Hosanna! Save us!" even when the authorities would prefer we keep quiet. It's amazing how much suffering we're willing to tolerate simply because we don't like admitting that things aren't okay. At some level, we know that once we confess that the way things are is not right, we are obligated to do something about it.

Shouting "Hosanna! Save us!" may not seem like doing much, but if it gets us unstuck from pretending everything is fine, that is a first step. And if we can broaden our "us" to include those whose lives have been more intensely impacted than our own – shouting "Hosanna! Save us!" in solidarity with Asian Pacific Islander neighbors impacted by rising hate crime, or Black neighbors affected by biased policing, or Hispanic and Filipino neighbors with higher rates of covid deaths – this ruckus begins to make a difference.

Once we start shouting "Hosanna!" we get to the third lesson of Palm Sunday. John has the shortest telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; he's also the only one to specifically mention palm branches. This holiday, by rights, ought to be called "Cloaks on the Road Sunday." But those palm branches, specifically named by John

and hinted at by Matthew and Mark, signify something about the crowd's expectations. They are there to welcome a triumphant, victorious king. John also doesn't waste time having the disciples procure the donkey. In this version, Jesus just finds the donkey himself, with no protracted explanations, in direct response to being called the "King of Israel" by people waving palm branches.

The truth is that when we cry "Hosanna!" we're hoping for some kind of decisive, super-hero salvation, just as those folks at the gates of Jerusalem were. We want to be saved by a conquering hero, with no responsibility other than saying "thank you" afterward. But this "king" came in on a donkey, which the scriptures clarify as a sign of humility. "Do not be afraid," it says, because anyone who can calm a young donkey enough to ride it must be gentle and humble of heart. Nothing here about conquering or victory. The salvation God is offering us is of a different nature entirely. The route to freedom goes through truth-telling and fear and sacrifice. To get to Easter, we have to go through Good Friday. Jesus is not the Messiah we want, but he's the Messiah we need. God hears our cry, but God's answer is not necessarily what we were expecting.

Are we excited? Yes. Maybe. Do we understand why? Not entirely. We've been living in a heightened state of confusion for over a year. We know things aren't right; we're ready to admit that out loud, but we only have inklings of how to get where God wants us to go. We've just begun to realize that we have to get the whole crowd there, or we'll never arrive; we can't leave anyone behind. If we want to get

there, we have to follow Jesus, this king unlike any other, gentle and humble in heart. And he's going places that will be hard; there will be moments of letting go of our own will in favor of God's will, moments of forgiveness more costly than we ever thought we could muster up, moments of sacrificial love we can hardly dare imagine. It's probably a blessing that we don't really understand why we're excited, because if we could truly comprehend the cost of following Jesus, we might choose not to. But it's worth it, in the end. Hope is on the horizon. It's fuzzy but it's there. Easter will come, even if the dawn seems to tarry. Let us not waver from shouting "Hosanna!" for the saving love of our God endures forever. Amen.