

## **“Hosanna! Save Us!”**

Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-13; Matthew 6:9-13; Psalm 35:1-10 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – April 10, 2022

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our faith might be strengthened for the journey ahead. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Since we completed our eight-week Gospel Comparisons Bible study this morning, I must begin by pointing out what you may have already noticed: Luke's version of the story of Palm Sunday doesn't have any palms! It doesn't even have the word "hosanna" in it. Yet, here we are using it to celebrate Palm Sunday, and my sermon is all about the word "hosanna." So I guess I should also express my thanks to Global Ministries for that lovely "Palms Around the World" video that quoted John's version of the story, so that we can be properly situated this morning. You may express your appreciation by using that Easter Special Offering envelope in your bulletin, to help support Global Ministries and our other general church ministries.

It has been interesting to look at the way the gospels include different details and frame stories from different angles, even though they are, as a whole, telling the same story. And truly, the conclusion we can draw from all of them, if we are to look at the stories of Lent leading up to Easter – that is, from the stories of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness through the stories of Palm Sunday and Holy Week do support one important conclusion, with regard to this year's Lenten theme of "Temptations in the Wilderness".

The gospels want to help us understand that we do not resist temptation on our own. Whether it's the desperation of hunger, the need for power, or the desire to test God – the specific temptations Jesus was presented with in the desert – or isolation, scarcity mind-set, holding onto the past, toxic positivity, or enemy assumptions – the temptations we've explored over the past five weeks – we're more easily equipped to resist these unholy ways of living if we lean on God. That is what Jesus models for us as he uses scripture to steady himself in the face of the devil's chicanery. If Jesus needed to turn to God to resist temptation, why would we think we don't need to?

For me, this is best summed up in two lines from the Lord's Prayer. As you might have guessed, the gospels treat the Lord's Prayer differently too, with only Matthew and Luke including it at all, and Matthew's version including more of what we think of as the Lord's Prayer. It is especially poignant to read this version today, with that final line "and rescue us from the evil one." If you ever sat next to Walter when it was time to say the Lord's Prayer together, you probably heard him say "and deliver us from the evil one" quietly when we got to that part. I'm not sure how he became familiar and attached to that particular wording, but I loved that he claimed the version of the prayer that was meaningful for him and stuck with it, unobtrusively but faithfully.

For me, the point is felt most powerfully in the language most of the rest of us use in worship: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." As I have

watched human life over my 46 years, what's stuck out to me about temptation and evil is that some of the worst harm is caused when we give into the temptation to deliver ourselves from evil. When we are threatened, our ways quickly depart from the transformative power of God's love into a "might makes right" approach that just makes things worse. The temptation of self-protection ends up turning us into the thing we want to be protected from.

This dynamic is hinted at in fascinating and paradoxical ways in the Palm Sunday story. When the crowd cries out, "Hosanna! Save us!" we could imagine that they've finally gotten it: God is our only salvation, so we must reject the desire to save ourselves. But we also know that the expectations of those in the crowd were likely more in line with easy assumptions about how we could save ourselves, with a white knight riding in on a horse to vanquish our enemies. The whole story of Holy Week is trying to show us that God's way is not about triumphantly overpowering our enemies and the forces of evil, but rather transforming violence and evil through the power of sacrificial love.

When we cry out "Hosanna! Save us!" we need to prepare ourselves for the truth that God's way of saving us may not look like what we expect. The wilderness lessons of this season aim to teach us this also. We have explored wilderness as a metaphor for the long period of uncertainty and instability we've been living in during the pandemic and the accompanying socio-political upheaval. It has worn on our souls, leaving us dried up and exhausted, with few resources to be our best selves.

But we've also seen that wilderness has blessings to offer us. Even wandering in the desert, God is with us. Luke's Jesus reminds us of this this morning. Those stones that the devil tempted him to turn into bread have become a reminder to him that even if every human follower had abandoned him before Palm Sunday, the rocks themselves would shout out and proclaim the glory of God. We live in a place with seeds that don't germinate and grow until after a wildfire has come through. Everything may have burned down around us; our world may have come crashing down around us. But creation whispers to us that God is still present and God's love will sustain us, no matter how bad things seem.

So on this Palm Sunday – or Cloaks on a Donkey Sunday as Luke might have us celebrate – let us aim to finally let go of our temptations to save ourselves and commit ourselves to leaning on God. The rockiest, steepest part of the Holy Week climb is yet ahead of us. Jesus goes before. We are called to follow, faithfully in spite of our fear. And when we stumble, as we will, let us cry out “Hosanna! Save us” with full conviction that it is God's hand that will steady our feet. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.