

April 9, 2017
Palm Sunday

“Save Us!”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Liturgy of the Palms, Matthew 21:1-11

Should we be celebrating Palm Sunday this morning? Twenty years ago, this would have been a silly question. Even ten years ago, it was pretty much a given that Christians start down the road toward the Passion by shaking greenery in the direction of the Messiah. We like to picture ourselves among the crowds that welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem ... waving branches ... singing hymns ... weaving ourselves in with those who hollered, "Hosanna! Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" It's how we begin our holiest week.

So, it may come as a surprise that over the last ten years ... this day, Palm Sunday, has fallen under scrutiny. Some theologians, good theologians, have asked if we need to change it. Why? Well, in a nutshell, their concern goes like this ... mid-week services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are not as well-attended as they used to be. Many Christians are not making it to Holy Week worship. Why, you ask? Well, your guess is probably as good as mine. I have heard some say that attendance is down because we are simply too busy. After all, the rest of the world doesn't pause on Friday at 1:00pm. The rhythms of our society are not set up to accommodate mid-week worship. Maybe we're trying to swim upstream. Others suggest that the problem lies in the soberness of Maundy Thursday and the sheer brutality of Good Friday. Perhaps the story of Christ's final days is too hard for some to bear ... too much of a downer, in a culture that savors a more upbeat religion.

Whatever the reason, it's true that many contemporary Christians go from the parade of Palm Sunday directly to the party of Easter without journeying down the rocky trail of Holy Week. And thus, the theological rub. Liturgists are concerned that Christians who skip over the events of the Passion ... arcing from one celebratory Sunday to the next ... will develop a puny faith.

Well, what happens to faith that has not had a chance to struggle ... faith that has not grappled with truly difficult moments in the life of God? It might become a faith that wilts in the face of hardship and tragedy. After all, if you believe that life is one long party for those who trust in God, then what happens when the party ends? Does faith end too? Wondering about all of this, the lectionary has suggested a compromise ... Palm/Passion Sunday ... a day on which we recognize both the triumphal entry and the events of the Passion.

I think the theology here is right on target ... although I wonder if the compromise that has been reached is not. Most of the Palm/Passion services that I have seen end up looking a lot like the Chevrolet product that came out in about 1965 ... the El Camino. The El Camino aspired to be both a cushy sedan (up front) and a rugged pickup truck (in the rear). In the end, though, it failed. The people who wanted a comfy ride bought sedans, and the people who wanted to haul stuff bought trucks. The ugly duckling El Camino had a pretty short shelf life. To have a Palm ..."slash" ... Passion service runs the same risk. In trying to do too much, it may end up

disappointing. Perhaps, then, some have suggested, we ought to jettison the Palm Sunday portion of our current hybrid. If we need the Passion to be spiritually whole, then shouldn't we make the crucifixion the central focus of the Sunday before Easter? And maybe that's where we'll end up. But, I wonder, will we miss something if we discard our annual parade?

As I have thought about this question, I keep coming back to that strange word, "Hosanna." You've got to admit that it is not a term that comes up in everyday conversation. If you are like me, the last time you uttered "Hosanna" was, well... a year ago in March, last Palm Sunday. It is a peculiar word ... one that is difficult to define. Scholars' best guess is that "Hosanna" is a contraction of two Hebrew terms: "yaw-shah," meaning to save or deliver ... and "naw," meaning to beseech or pray. So you might translate the shouts of the crowd as: "We beseech you to deliver us." The people cheered. They tossed branches from the nearby trees to the ground, and they called out, "Hosanna." They looked upon this prophet ... rumored to be the Messiah ... and they cried out to him, "Save us! Save us!" I'm thinking that the meaning of Palm Sunday hangs on those two words ... on that simple plea. Do we feel compelled to shout "Save us!" to our God as we prepare for Holy Week?

Once a year in Nekoosa I used to play "stump-the pastor" with our kids preparing for Confirmation. They would ask me questions that they had scribbled on 3x5 cards. One year, one of the cards asked, in so many words, "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" Being an annoying pastor, I told them that before I would answer that question, they had to answer one for me. "Since salvation implies that you are being saved from something, what do you think Jesus is saving you from?" The first answer that came back was "hell." "Jesus saves people from hell." Now, I don't think this is necessarily a bad answer. But I must admit that my initial reaction when someone answers that "hell" is what God saves us from ... is suspicion. I am suspicious: first, because, for a good portion of American Christians, this is the (obvious and only) "right answer." In other words, I had to wonder if the youth were thinking: Here is the preacher; the question is, "What does Jesus save us from?" She must want us to respond, "Hell." It's kind of similar to what happens when I go to see my doctor, and he asks, "So, have you been exercising?" and I know what he wants me to say.

Still, beyond being suspicious of people's tendency to want to tell the pastor what they think she wants to hear, I have some theological concerns about this answer. It is a complicated thing to ask, "What does God save us from?" I don't believe that the people lining the streets of Jerusalem were primarily concerned about "hell" when they were shouting out to Jesus. If the gospels hint at the crowd's motivation, it was that the people wanted to be "saved" from the Romans. They wanted deliverance from an occupying army. All of this is to say, I decided to change tactics with our Confirmation class. "Let me put it this way," I said to them, "What would do you wish God would save you from?" Suddenly, our conversation got interesting ... very interesting.

One of the youth raised her hand and said, "Death." Another one offered that God could really help him out by saving him from an upcoming math test. Then one of the seventh graders said, "Pressure." And another youth said, "My parents' expectations." Then another, shy individual, almost in a whisper said, "Fear. I want God to save me from my fears." All of these answers struck me as more sincere than "hell." Although, I think you could argue that their comments

gave a pretty clear picture of what "hell" looks like to a middle schooler.

Can we dip down into our souls and be as honest as these young people were? When we wave our palms and boldly cry out, "Hosanna," do we dare imagine what we really want God to save us from? Save me from anger. Save me from cancer. Save me from depression. Save me from debt. Save me from the strife in my family. Save me from boredom. Save me from the endless cycle of violence. Save me from humiliation. Save me from staring at the ceiling at three a.m. wondering why I exist. Save me from bitterness. Save me from arrogance. Save me from loneliness. Save me, God, save me from my fears.

In viewing Palm Sunday from that angle, we can begin to see the potential for some real depth in this celebration ... for embedded in our waving palms is an appeal to God that originates in the most vulnerable places inside of us ... and it bubbles, almost beyond our control, to the surface. "Hosanna." "Save us." Please God take the broken places that will tear us apart and make them whole. We beseech you, God, jump into the water and drag our almost-drowned selves to shore. "Save us." "Hosanna."

The trajectory suggested by those middle schoolers may redeem Palm Sunday from triviality ... but it also forces two important follow-up questions. First, after we ask God to save us, we want to know: Does God respond to our cries? Does God do anything to save us? And, second, how does God save us? These are crucial inquiries for those of us who cling to the Christian faith, and I want to take my own meager shot at answering them. But before I do that, I should say that I believe that the answer to these questions (to the extent that there is any "answer" that makes sense at all) is entrenched in the mystery of this coming week. In other words, I think that the journey from Maundy Thursday through Good Friday and finally to Easter is the closest thing to an answer that we Christians have.

Of course, the danger in this assertion is that the story we will experience this coming week may not feel like salvation. That is one of the stark outcomes in today's text. The people wanted salvation, which they defined as "freedom from the Romans." When it became apparent that Jesus was not "that kind of Messiah," the people's jubilation quickly vanished. "Save us," they cried, but then Jesus did not set about saving them in a manner that they could recognize. He did not take up a sword and send the Romans fleeing. Instead, he went and had supper with his friends; he went and prayed in a garden. Some Messiah!?! It only took a few days for the crowds to switch from crying "Hosanna" to the shouts of "Crucify him." So, yes, the risk of Holy Week is that we'll take a peek at Jesus' actions and think, "Hmm, this doesn't look much like salvation to me."

So what does it look like to be saved by God? In experiencing the fullness of Holy Week, one of the strands that I have always clung to for comfort is the notion that this story is about God being with us. How does God being with us save us? I am not completely sure, but I do think that part of being saved involves a God who would stoop to step right into the messiest and scariest parts of life with us.

Sixteen years ago my father took his life. To say that I was devastated is a masterpiece of understatement. I was standing in the funeral home in Gainesville, Texas, and my mind was reeling with the kind of crazy mixed of emotions that being in the presence of a dead loved one

seems to bring on. I wasn't sure whether I could stand being in that space much longer; and yet, I knew that this is where I had to be. It was precisely at that moment when my best friend since the fourth grade, walked into the funeral home. At that moment, my mind could not square her presence with my location. It couldn't be ...she lives in California. I looked away, and then I looked back. Sure enough, there she was. It is impossible to describe the power of that moment. I felt... sort of... well... "saved."

You know this too, don't you? To be approached by friends in a time of great need is to experience a fierce solidarity that smacks of the holy. I have got to believe that this is, in part, how God saves us. God doesn't fax salvation in from some suite in heaven's ritzy district. God comes. God incarnates. God steps out of the grandeur to stand with us in awkward places ... at awful times ... to experience life and death. God answers our cries of "Hosanna" in ways so utterly unexpected that we have got to look (a second time) to see if they can possibly be true.

I wonder... is there any better way to commence Holy Week than with palms in our hands and "Hosannas" on our lips? Is there any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey than to ask God, out of the deep, honest places inside of us, to "Save us... please, save us"?

Let us pray.

Merciful God, as we enter Holy Week turn our hearts again to Jerusalem...to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus...so that united with Christ and all the faithful, we may one day enter the city not made by human hands, the new Jerusalem.