

“Save Us”

April 5, 2020 (Palm Sunday)
CoVid-19 wk 3

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From the Living Room of the Heath family

Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately. This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 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!”

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

In this reading we hear God’s voice. Thanks be to God.

You remember the story. The week of his death, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, while the crowds cheered and waved palm branches yelling “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

We think of *Hosanna* as meaning the same thing as *Hallelujah* – like: “Hosanna, yay, way to go Jesus!” But Hosanna is different from hallelujah. Hosanna means: “*Save us!*” When Jesus came into Jerusalem, the crowd was hoping for a Saviour.

The Jewish people were under occupation from the Romans. They were not free. They longed to be free from the constant military presence, from the taxes and laws that Rome imposed on them.

Jesus had gained in popularity — as I said last week, he was definitely ‘trending’. Some said he was a prophet, like the great Elijah; some were even saying he was John the Baptist come back from the dead; but other rumours were going around that he was the Messiah, the Chosen One of God, who would save them from the Romans.

As we celebrate Palm Sunday in Spring 2020 and as we move into Holy Week, it seems that the cry: “Hosanna! Save us!” feels about right. What do you want to be saved from? From the Corona Virus? From isolation? From anxiety? From boredom? From financial ruin? From illness? From toxic relationships? From yourself?

At times we all need saving from something that is not good or healthy in our lives. Life is hard; but it is especially hard now with CoVid-19, with shutdowns and cancelations. Everything that was hard before is harder now. If you had financial issues before, they are bigger now. If you had medical issues before, they are being put on hold for later. If you had mental health challenges or struggles with addiction ... well again, so many supports that were in place have been taken away.

In Brockville this week we had a man shoot his partner before turning the gun on himself. Because it’s a small city, many of us have connections to the man or the young mother who was a nurse at the hospital. And there are connections to our church. We hold in prayer the children and the parents and all the family, the friends, the neighbours and colleagues of the couple. Sadly, incidents of domestic violence increase in these times of crises—again stress, mental illness, all of these increase in these times. In all of this we just want to cry out “Lord have mercy! Lord save us!”

I want to speak to you who are Christian, who follow Jesus, and let you know that it’s OK to not be OK. It does not mean that you are less of a Christian if you find fear and despair creeping in. We are human, and we are going through a really difficult chapter right now ... and we don’t have to pretend to be strong all the time.

It’s not easy to cry: “Help!”

Our family has been in quarantine for the last two weeks. We’re officially out of quarantine now, but of course not much has or will change for us. We will still be staying home. The big thing that will change is that we won’t have to rely on others for help. That’s a relief to me because I don’t like asking for help. I don’t like being a burden on other people. Do you? Now I know that those who offered to pick up groceries for us were happy to help, but it’s hard to shake that feeling of so wanting to be independent and self-sufficient. But like it or not, there are times when we get to a point where we have no choice but to ask for help. And the truth is

that it's good for me to practice asking for help, because being independent is an illusion and it can be a sin too—something that blocks us from God. In terms of our faith, asking for help can be a powerful prayer. There is something about dropping to your knees and acknowledging your need that makes it more likely that you will receive a blessing.

All through the scriptures it is to the humble that God seems to draw close. As Psalm 51:17 reads "*a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*" Or as the Message translation puts it: "*Going through the motions doesn't please you; a flawless performance is nothing to you. I learned God-worship when my pride was shattered. Heart-shattered lives ready for love, don't for a moment escape God's notice.*"

There is something about being proud that blocks God's presence, and there is something about being at the bottom and crying out for help that sends God's presence rushing in.

I think that is part of the truth behind the Beatitudes in Matthew Chapter 5. You remember: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God; blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted; blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth...*" and it goes on. Now I'm not saying it's automatic because sometimes when you are grieving and really struggling it can be hard to hear God's voice and to feel God's presence, but I'll tell you that all through the scriptures it is to those who know they are broken that God comes.

Not that God always comes the way we want God to come. Not that salvation comes the way we hope and dream it will come. When Jesus entered into Jerusalem the crowd wanted a military leader. They wanted someone who could rally the people to take up arms against Rome so that they could be free. For them salvation looked like a political and revolutionary take-down. We know that's not what happened. A mere five days later, Jesus was executed — and any hopes that the crowds had about Jesus saving them were utterly dashed. The crowd was so disappointed that they seem to be the same ones who chanted: "*Crucify him!*" four days later.

When we call out for help — when we cry "Hosanna to the son of David!" we have to let the Saviour come on his own terms; not on ours. We think the answer to our problem is winning the lottery, or a miracle drug, or a perfect spouse (I know I'm exaggerating a little)! I mean we'd settle for a small inheritance from a relative, a drug that would do the job without so many side effects, a spouse who would listen to us from time to time. What does salvation look like on your terms?

Saviour. It's one of the names or titles we have for Jesus, but no one would have guessed that salvation would come through a brutal and humiliating death on a cross. Jesus tried to prepare his disciples. Countless times he told them what was coming, but they just couldn't hear it.

"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Matthew 16: 21-25

I imagine that even Jesus himself had to die to his own idea of salvation in order pick up this much more difficult one. Jesus could have done what the crowd wanted. Maybe they would even have managed to overthrow the Romans for a time, but that would not have been a salvation that lasted. The Roman Empire collapsed a few hundred years later on its own. It would have been a short-lived salvation — like when you get a lucky break but the next month you're back to where you were.

The salvation that Jesus brought was for all time and it was deeper, much deeper than some surface salvation the people thought they wanted and needed.

Sometimes Jesus calms the storm, but more often than not Jesus calms our spirit and reminds us that he is here with us in the storm. Sometimes Jesus will rescue us from the bad and ugly situation we find ourselves in, but more often than not Jesus fills us with the courage to make a change in our own lives that would allow us to change our situation. Sometimes Jesus will change systems and structures, but more often than not *Jesus changes people so much that they change the world.*

We are living through a difficult time in history. I pray that you are doing OK, but if not, ask for help. Reach out to others, however hard that feels — and cry out to God. Tell God you can't do it alone and you need help. God will hear your prayer. Be open to how God wants to bring you to something new. Remember that we do not worship one who avoided hardship and pain, but one who knowingly walked right into it. Jesus will walk into your pain and lead you through it. Jesus didn't walk towards the

cross and towards pain for the fun of it, but so that he could truly answer the cry of the crowd yesterday and today: "Hosanna! Save us!".

Psalm 118:19-29 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Amen!