

## HOSANNAS AND HIGH HOPES

<sup>1</sup> And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Beth'phage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If any one says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and he will send them immediately." <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup> "Tell the daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." <sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. <sup>8</sup> Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" <sup>10</sup> And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup> And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11, RSV, adapted)

I love Palm Sunday: the upbeat tempo of the hymns, the life that all the green palms inject into our sanctuary.

Most of all I love watching our children parade down the aisle with their palms. You never know what's going to happen when kids are involved in worship. Will the little ones make it down the aisle without Mom? Will the big ones make it down without clobbering each other? It's a little hectic, a little confusing, and always charming. I think most parades are like this, and that's part of the reason I've loved them ever since I was a child—from the ones I marched in as a drummer to the ones I watched with my family on TV.

Growing up, my favorite parade was the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Every year I glued myself to the TV as my Mom and Dad worked on our upcoming feast. Never did I think that one day I would live in New York and get to go in person. But sure enough, back in 1994 after living here four months November rolled around and we just had to go into the city, stand in the freezing cold for hours, and watch the jubilant parade. I hadn't gone back to see it in person until this year, which was coincidentally right about the time when Colleen's feet were finally thawing out from that first trip there.

This year two of our members, Marty and Margot Kramer, invited my family and the Peeples family to view the parade from inside their building on Broadway near Herald Square. There we were, on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, right in the thick of things, seeing Snoopy, Arthur, and all the other Saturday morning icons eye to eye. Like the rest of the

kids there, Matthew ate it up. For the adults however, this year was different. Instead of being all fun and games, the celebration was mixed with sorrow.

This was the first time we had taken Matthew into the city since September 11<sup>th</sup> and he was curious about the National Guard and their M-16's in Penn Station. We had to walk the wrong direction halfway to the Hudson River in order to get through all of the police barricades. The parade itself seemed normal enough with Willard Scott dressed up like a pilgrim and riding a huge mechanical turkey. But toward the end of the parade I looked up Broadway and the reality of the recent atrocities hit home once more. Firefighters and police officers in dress uniforms were marching solemnly down the route, carrying two of the longest American flags I had ever seen. The pain on their faces and the change in the mood of the crowd could be felt everywhere. We changed from individual spectators into a community of mourners.

If we turn the clock back 2,000 years to the Palm Sunday parade that led Jesus into Jerusalem, we will find joy and sorrow, jubilation and despair mingled together with the waving palm branches and chanting crowds. The spectators must have felt happy, hopeful, excited. The famous Rabbi Jesus was riding into town: The man who had proven himself a mighty teacher, prophet, and healer. The word on the street was that some people even thought he might be the Messiah, the Christ, God's Chosen One who would lead Israel out of Roman Oppression like a modern day Moses and restore the monarchy like a modern day David.

There was a sense of excitement in the air because everybody who was anybody was coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the biggest holiday of the entire year. The city brimmed with people and overflowed with high hopes that maybe this year God's promised Deliverer would come. We can hear it in the words they chanted. "Hosanna," they cried out. "Hosanna to the Son of David." The word "hosanna" came from a Hebrew word that was used in several Psalms and it meant, "Save now" (*The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 2, William Barclay, p. 239*). "Son of David" referred to Jesus following in David's footsteps, as well as his being a direct descendant of David. "Hosanna to the Son of David," "Save us now, Son of David." In essence, they were crying out, "Save us now from our Roman oppressors. Save us now from being a has-been nation. Save us now and put us back on the map as God's chosen people." Their words reflect high hopes, but they also speak of deep sorrows, deep wounds in the psyche of the nation and the daily lives of the people. They needed help, and they knew it. So they placed their hearts and their hopes in the hands of this Galilean.

For Jesus too the parade must have been a mixture of hope and hopelessness. His mind might have mused about the possibility of all these people really understanding his message and mission. His heart might have skipped a beat as he imagined how different old Jerusalem might really be if people started following God's way of love. But more than that, I think he must have felt a sense of doom and dread.

Jesus went to Jerusalem knowing the track record of the prophets who had preceded him, and knowing that his claim was much more radical than theirs ever were.

He went knowing the unpredictable nature of any crowd and the fickleness of the human heart. He went knowing that his old enemies from the religious establishment would hear of his entrance into the city and would be keeping close tabs on him. He knew all of this, but he went anyway. And when he did, he was welcomed by the crowd waving their palm branches, singing psalms, and laying their cloaks on the road as a red carpet before him (Barclay, p. 239). All signs pointed to a royal treatment.

How did the people expect Jesus to arrive in town? Did they picture him charging in on a horse, ready to lead them to military victory? What must they have thought when they saw him perched on a humble donkey, as a sign that he came in peace? (Ibid. p.243). How did Jesus compare to popular expectations? How did this Sunday parade turn into a Friday death march? Clearly as the week wore on, when Jesus spent time teaching in the Temple instead of plotting a military coup, the people began to grumble. As he showed no interest in ruling on a human throne, but rather in the human heart, the people began to seethe. As he showed no interest in an earthly kingdom but instead in the Kingdom of Heaven, their anger reached a boiling point.

Of course, it wasn't just the people. Jesus had been having run-ins with the Pharisees for several years, and they were happy to make his life difficult. Shortly after entering Jerusalem, Jesus once more angered the religious establishment by driving out the Temple's moneychangers, and the people who sold animal sacrifices. Suddenly he wasn't just a pain in the neck, but a pain in the pocketbook. They didn't like his views of the law and they didn't like the way he talked so personally about God, as if he had the inside track. They didn't like the threat he posed to their own established authority. So throughout this week we call "holy," the religious leaders worked to eliminate the Holy One himself. Palm Sunday's hosannas and high hopes gave way to a Roman cross.

What does this say to us today? Where do we find ourselves in the parade of our lives, this existence of ours where joy and sorrow, jubilation and sadness mingle together with mundane trips to the store and straightening the house? The somberness we have experienced this past year is unprecedented for my generation. We have ached as we saw the photos of the children in Texas who were killed by their own mother. We've been shocked by losing a daughter of this town and church, Diane Whipple, to a vicious attack by so called "war dogs." Reminders of September 11<sup>th</sup> are everywhere we turn, from the news to the faces of our neighbors and friends. Each of us carries burdens in our lives, for ourselves and for the people we love.

Life can be painful and discouraging, and we would be a people without hope if the Holy Week story ended with the death of Jesus on the cross. But thank God, literally, thank God neither Jesus' story nor our story ends with death and defeat. For the Good Friday tragedy turned into the Easter miracle and a whole new parade began, a parade of downtrodden people who found an empty tomb and have been singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" ever since.

Our hopes can still get crushed, and our hosannas, our cries for help, still grow louder during difficult times. However, our faith teaches us that God hears our cries and

that God cares and answers us. The answer may not be what we expect, but somehow and in some way God will accompany us as God has since the day we were born. God will be there in the presence of other people who can help us. God will be there in the friend who is a good listener. God will be there in the stranger who shows us kindness. God will be there through our children and grandchildren who make us sigh and smile. God will be there in the beauty of a sunset and the twinkling blanket of stars. God accompanies us through all the joy, sorrow, and humdrum days of life's grand parade.

Each of our parades takes a different route, but we're bound by a common faith. A faith in the living God who knows us through and through, whose love remains a constant in our unpredictable lives. The life of faith is not about avoiding the difficult detours, for those are inevitable. Jesus' own journey plainly illustrates that. But we travel it knowing that no matter how difficult, that the God who became flesh went before us, and accompanies us to this day. Even when we learn nothing from our pain, we continue the journey in faith. Sometimes the difficult detour brings us back to the right road. And sometimes the difficult detour turns out to be the right road after all—for the road to the cross was also the road to the empty tomb.

During this Holy Week may we all cry out "Hosanna, Son of David." May we welcome Christ into our lives. May we place our frail hearts and hopes in his hands. For the Messiah who knew both adoration and rejection guides us always toward the Kingdom of Heaven. AMEN

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
Edited by Colleen Brown Only  
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Loving God, today like the crowd of old we gather to proclaim Jesus as our Messiah and King. He has entered our lives as your humble servant but we're not entirely sure what to make of him. We need your help, for we are often tempted to be like the fickle crowd who turned away from Christ when he deviated from their expectations, when he failed to be predictable. Help us be faithful to your Christ and your Way when the going gets difficult and life does not go according to plan. Reassure us that you are ever near even when our lives get off course. Remind us that through the power of your Spirit our lives can once again have meaning and purpose, joy and fulfillment.