Psalm 118:25-27 ***The Palm Sunday Psalm***

***A Good Time for a Party?***Today is Palm Sunday. Today is the day on the church calendar where we remember Jesus entering the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Traditionally, it is a celebratory Sunday. The story says that as Jesus rode a donkey into the city, a spontaneous party broke out. He was surrounded by pilgrims who were headed to the city to observe the Passover. As word spread throughout the crowd that Jesus was approaching, they formed a sort of parade route. They shouted “Hosanna!” and “Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the LORD!” They threw their cloaks on the road in front of Jesus and they cut Palm branches to wave in the air. Jesus was being honored and celebrated and when some of the Pharisees questioned whether it was appropriate, Jesus responded by saying that if the crowds were silent, even the rocks themselves would cry out.

Originally, it was not my plan to preach about Palm Sunday today. The series we were going to do for Lent this year was called “An 8-Day Revolution”. The idea was that we would go day by day through the week leading up to the crucifixion asking how it was that Jesus ended up on the cross. Many people have an image of Jesus as a sort of 1st Century Mr. Rogers, so we were going to look into the revolutionary things Jesus said and did that led to him being executed.

Under that plan, then, we actually came to the Palm Sunday story on the second Sunday of Lent. And since that was the weekend of my annual trip to the Missouri Valley Conference basketball tournament, my wife Beth preached that weekend and did an excellent job of showing how the crowd’s picture of Jesus didn’t match up with Jesus’ mission. In other words, Palm Sunday was the start of the revolution, but it wasn’t the revolution the people were looking for.

It was shortly after that weekend that everything got weird. That was the week we started getting serious about social distancing and from that point we kind of set our preaching plan aside. The last few weeks it has seemed more appropriate to talk about a Christian approach to quarantine than to continue our series.

But today is the start of Holy Week, and it seems like we should be directing our attention back to the last week of Jesus’ pre-resurrection life. More than that, it feels like we could use a good celebration. Maybe a Palm Sunday parade would feel pretty good right now.

So, I’m not changing anything Beth said about Palm Sunday. Her approach to the story is the one I’ve always taken. That is, it always strikes me that the crowds that were shouting Jesus’ praise on Sunday were the same crowds calling for His death on Friday. For me, Palm Sunday has always been tinged with a little bit of darkness; because even though the crowds were right to praise Jesus, they were wrong in their expectations. If you haven’t heard Beth’s sermon I encourage you to check it out in our sermon archive (what else do you have to do?)

But today, I really do want to focus on the part they got right. And so, for my sermon text, I’ve chosen **Psalm 118, verses 25-27. I call this the “Palm Sunday Psalm”** because this is the Psalm that the crowd was singing as Jesus approached the city.

Scholars believe that several of the Psalms existed as songs to be sung while travelling to the Holy City. Psalm 118 is one of them. It is a song for festive, processional, corporate worship.

And **verses 27 through 29,** in particular, are the verses that show up in the Palm Sunday story. As the people spontaneously gathered around Jesus, this was the part of the song that sprang to their lips:

**25**Lord, save us!
    Lord, grant us success!
**26**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
    From the house of the Lord we bless you.
**27**The Lord is God,
    and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
    up to the horns of the altar.

What I’d like to do today is look at three things in the Palm Sunday story that come directly from this Psalm; and see if we can’t apply them both to Jesus and to our current situation. They are: the word “Hosanna”; the exclamation “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” and the Palm Branches.

***“O Lord, Save!”***First, the word **“Hosanna!”** This is the word behind **Psalm 118:25.**

“Hosanna” is one of those fun words that we use in the church without always translating it. “Hallelujah” would be another example. As well as one of my favorites: “Maranatha.”

Most of you know that the New Testament was first written in Greek, while the Old Testament was first written in Hebrew. Whenever the word “hosanna” occurs in our English Bibles, the Greek word behind it is the word “hosanna”. It is a case where the English translators have chosen to use the English letters to make the sound of the Greek word.

But if you would look in a Greek dictionary to find the meaning of the word, you would find that it is not really a Greek word at all. The men who wrote the New Testament in Greek did the same thing to a Hebrew word that our English translators did to the Greek word: they used Greek letters to make the sound of a Hebrew phrase.

I know this is sounding complicated, but it’s really not. Our English word “hosanna” comes from a Greek word “hosanna” which comes from a Hebrew phrase **“hoshiya na”.** And that particular Hebrew phrase can be found in one solitary place in the entire Old Testament… right here in Psalm 118:25, where it means “O Lord, save us!”

So the word “Hosanna” is a cry for help. If you can imagine standing on a diving board before you know how to swim, and you fall off and then come spluttering up out of the water, if you spoke ancient Hebrew, this is what you might have yelled: “Help! Save me!...Hoshiya Na!”

Except, something interesting happened to that phrase. Over the years, the meaning began to change. Perhaps because in the Psalm it is followed by the exclamation: “Blessed is He who comes in the name the Lord,” the cry for help began to be thought of as a declaration that help had already arrived. Instead of a call: “Save us!” it began to be thought of as a celebration: “Salvation! Salvation is here!”

Over the centuries, this cry for help became a shout of exaltation. If it used to be what you would say when you fell off the diving board: “Help me! Save me!”; it became what you would cry when the lifeguard got to you: “I am saved! Salvation is here!” Hosanna is the joy of salvation on the way and the response of a heart that can’t hold it in.

That’s why they were shouting “Hosanna” as Jesus entered the city. There are two senses to the word, and both were in play. On the one hand, they were calling for the Lord to save them. It was a longing for God to step into their circumstances to make a difference. And, on the other hand, it was a declaration of their confidence that Jesus was the difference maker. That, in Jesus, God was doing something new.

Here’s a fun way to think of it: imagine your favorite team makes the Super Bowl. Your team is ahead by 3 points in the final seconds, and the other team has the ball. They fake it to one side of the field before throwing it back to the other sideline. Now, their best player is running alone for the endzone: 40, 45, 50, 45, 40. Everyone on your team fell for the fake, except one player. Your safety has got the angle, and he’s running as fast as he can.

Now, from your team’s grandstand come two kinds of hosannas, the old kind and the new kind. One part of the crowd is yelling: “Catch him! Catch him!” (that’s the old hosanna). The other part is yelling: “You got him! You got him!” (that’s the new hosanna). The word moves from plea to praise. From cry to confidence. (this whole section on “Hosanna” comes from John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/hosanna> )

The word can have the same sort of duel sense today, can’t it? When we cry “hosanna” today, one of the things we are saying is: “Lord, save us! Lord, look at our situation. Look at this virus and the way it has crippled nations. Protect our nursing homes. Protect our businesses. Save our school children and those who are unemployed. Have mercy on us Lord. Hosanna. O Lord, save us!”

But, at the same time, we can say: “Salvation is here! Jesus is our salvation! Jesus, we know you have this all under control! We know that you are Lord. We know that even microbes and viruses must answer to you. Hosanna! We find our salvation in you!”

Jesus is the one who saves. Jesus is our rescuer. And we celebrate that today.

***“Blessed is He!”***Second, the crowds shouted to Jesus: **“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”** That’s Psalm 118:26.

The key phrase here is “the name of the Lord.”

Throughout the Bible, God’s name is a big deal. When God told Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, the big question Moses had was “Who will I say sent me? What’s your name?” And God answered by saying “I AM THAT I AM.” He gave His name as the very name for existence. The third commandment explicitly warns against taking the name of the Lord in vain; and throughout the Old Testament people refused to speak God’s name out loud. Instead, they would substitute the word for Lord. When David fights Goliath, he does so “in the name of the Lord.” When the armies of Israel march out to battle, they do so “in the name of the Lord.” The Psalms declare that the name of the Lord is a strong tower and a solid rock.

It’s not that God’s name is magic. It’s not like a secret code for getting whatever you want. But God’s name represents His essence, His character, Who He Is. To talk about God’s name is to talk about Him.

And so, if someone comes in the name of the Lord that means someone is coming as His appointed representative. It means someone who is championing God’s honor, someone who upholds God’s value, someone who sees God as the rightful king of the universe and ruler of creation.

It’s like those fantasy movies and stories from medieval times, where the knight rides up to the city gates at the head of an army. There’s always a speech about how the army is here representing such and such a king, and by the virtue of that king’s right to rule and so on and so forth the people inside the city should lay down their arms and acknowledge the king’s sovereignty. To come in the name of a king means to come with his authority and power.

This line then--“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD”--reflects one of the great expectations of the Old Testament world. The people of Israel believed there was a coming Messiah—which is another one of those Hebrew words that we tend not to translate. Messiah means “anointed one” and was the word used to describe an anticipated hero—descended from King David--whom God was going to send to save His people. Most people assumed that this Messiah would be a great warrior, a military type hero who would expel Israel’s enemies and establish a new earthly kingdom that would be greater than anything history had ever seen. The Greek word for “messiah” is “Christ.”

So, the great question throughout Jesus’ ministry was whether or not He was the Messiah. We call Him Jesus Christ, so obviously we believe He was. But it isn’t like Christ was part of His name, it is more of a title that we have assigned to him after the fact.

While He was teaching and preaching, however, it was an open question. Is He the Messiah, or isn’t He? His cousin John the Baptist asked Him point blank: “Are you the one? Or should we wait for another?”

On Palm Sunday, though, the crowds answered that question with a resounding “Yes!” “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Yes! This is the one we have been waiting for! This is the Messiah!

Palm Sunday was perhaps the only day of His earthly life where Jesus received the sort of welcome He truly deserved. It was perhaps the only day of His life where He was recognized and honored as the Messiah He truly was.

The irony, of course, is that the crowd’s expectations of a Messiah and Jesus’ Messianic mission were so wildly at odds. He was and is the Christ, but that didn’t mean what they thought it would mean.

And yet, to this day, it is important that we recognize Jesus as the one who truly does come in the name of the Lord. Again, in the midst of worldwide crisis, it’s important that we hail Jesus as the hero that was promised. If anyone can save in the midst of this pandemic, Jesus is the one.

***“Victory”***The third thing, then, is the **Palm Branch**. As Jesus approached, the crowd waved branches and use them to carpet His path. We call today Palm Sunday. This is **Psalm 118:27**.

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
    up to the horns of the altar.

For ancient Israel, the Palm branch was a national symbol. If you think of the maple leaf on the Canadian flag or the palmetto on South Carolina’s flag, in the same way ancient Israel identified with the Palm Branch.

Palm trees were an important and useful resource for building material and for shade and beauty. They even provided food in the form of their delicious dates. They were so much a part of the landscape that the first city that the children of Israel captured in entering the Promised Land was Jericho - also known in the Bible as "the city of palm trees" (Deut. 34:3; 2 Chron. 28:15).

The palm tree became, then, a symbol for the land promised to the children of Israel by God - a symbol of such things as God's blessing on the land, of His provision for the needs of His people through the land, and of the nobility and honor and beauty of the land. If they had license plates in those days, those license plates would - no doubt - have had palm trees on them!

But the branch of the palm tree was also used as an important symbol of victory. The first time we read of this is in Leviticus 23. After God had delivered the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, and while they were on their way to the promised land, God commanded them to celebrate an annual feast. It was called the Feast of Tabernacles; and in it, the people were to celebrate for a seven day period by living in little "booths" or "tabernacles" that they made from palm branches (Lev. 23:40). God said they were to do this, "that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (v. 43).

As Psalm 118 says, then, when the people marched in procession to the Holy City, it was common practice to waive Palm branches in the air. It was a symbol of national unity, national pride, and national victory. In the same way that we go to Veteran’s Day parades and waive the Stars and Stripes, the people of Israel waived Palm Branches.

When they waived the branches for Jesus then they believed that they were celebrating the coming of a mighty, conquering King who would gain great victory for them by delivering them from their oppressors. They were right in thinking of Him as a great deliverer. But they didn't realize that He was coming to gain the victory over sin; and that He would do this by dying on the cross.

Today, we have a much greater understanding of what He came into Jerusalem to do. We understand today, more than they did then, what a great victory it was! And we - who have been delivered from our sins by our Savior, Jesus Christ - have the greatest reason of all to wave our palm branches in celebration!

But did you know that the palm branch, as a symbol of victory, is found in one additional - and very surprising - place in the Bible? It’s a passage that recognizes not only Jesus’ victory over sin, but also looks forward to the day when Jesus will be revealed as the ultimate victor over evil. The day when every knee will bow and tongue confess that He is Lord.

The passage is **Revelation 7:9-10**, and here’s what it says:

**9**After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. **10**And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

Here is a picture of heaven, of the great celebration that will take place when history has drawn to a close and Jesus will be the undisputed ruler. When death and disease and disaster will have been brought to an end.

At that time, the redeemed will wave their palm branches, and they will shout their hosannas, and they will proclaim “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

When we celebrate Palm Sunday today, and we honor that original triumphal entry, this is the celebration we are ultimately anticipating. This is the real Palm Sunday, the day when Jesus is recognized as King.

So we shout Hosanna. Lord save us. But also, salvation is here.

We shout “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” because we know Jesus is the hero we need.

And we wave our palm branches, because we know Jesus brings the victory.