

Palm Sunday

St. Matthew 21:1-9: "We Sing the Song of Salvation."

March 27/28, 2021 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God heavenly Father, we give You hearty thanks that for us poor sinners You ordained and sent Your Son as a righteous King and Savior to redeem Your people from sins, from the power of the devil, and from eternal death. And we most heartily ask You to enlighten and govern us by Your Holy Spirit that we may ever know and confess Christ to be our King and Savior and, firmly trusting in Him alone, receive eternal life through Him, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, p. 605)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front 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, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." / This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "*Say to 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 beast of burden.'*" / The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is our strength and our song, since He has become our salvation (Psa. 118:14), dear fellow redeemed:

The festival times of the year are when tradition seems especially important. So at Christmas, you always put up certain decorations in your home and prepare special foods. Maybe the same goes for Easter with its unique decorations, foods, and activities. At church, you expect certain readings to be read on these days, and you look forward to singing certain hymns. Christmas Eve might not seem the same without "Silent Night" or Christmas Day without "Joy to the World." On Easter, it might be "Like the Golden Sun Ascending" or "I Know That My Redeemer Lives."

The Jewish people had their own traditions for the major Old Testament festivals. Probably the most important festival was the Passover. This festival recounted the LORD's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. At that first Passover in Egypt, each Israelite household selected a lamb without any blemish, roasted its meat over the fire, and ate it being careful not

to break any bones. Then they painted the lamb's blood on the doorposts, so that the angel of God passed over that house and spared the lives of everyone inside.

The Israelites were to celebrate this deliverance every year. After the temple was built, they traveled to Jerusalem annually for the Passover Feast. We know that Jesus' parents did this and brought Him along with them (Luk. 2:41). The Israelites were accustomed to singing certain songs at the Passover like we do at our festivals, and we know what they sang. We still have the hymnbook they used, because it is part of the Holy Scriptures. The Israelites sang from the Book of Psalms.

There were six Psalms in particular which were used for the Passover. Psalms 113-114 were sung before the Passover meal, and Psalms 115-118 were sung after the meal (called the "Passover Hallel" or the "Egyptian Hallel"). The festival would not have been the same without these Psalms, and most of the people knew them by heart.

The timing of Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem was not random. He came to the city riding on a donkey at the beginning of Passover week. He came as the city was filling up with people who were arriving for the festival. The evangelist John said it was a large crowd that greeted Jesus. They were drawn to Him by more than just curiosity. They came because they had heard that He raised Lazarus from the dead (Luk. 12:18).

You can imagine the electricity in the crowd. Here was the Man whom many of the religious leaders hated, but whose power could not be denied. No one had done miracles like He did. No one taught like He did. Could this be the Messiah? Could this be the long-awaited heir to David's throne? Could He be the beginning of a new "exodus," a new freedom from oppression by the Romans?

As they pressed forward to get a glimpse of Jesus and laid their cloaks and palm branches on the road in front of Him, they did something interesting. They started singing—or at least shouting—the words of their Passover song. They chose the words from the last part of the song, from Psalm 118, which describes the coming of the Messiah. Here is some context from the Psalm for their Palm Sunday "*Hosanna!*" and "*Blessed is He,*" starting with verse 19:

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, And I will praise the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD, Through which the righteous shall enter.

²¹ I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation.

²² The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This was the LORD's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day the LORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save now, I pray, O LORD; O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity.

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ God is the LORD, And He has given us light; Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. (Psa. 118, NKJV)

This was the source of the people's Palm Sunday song. The word "Hosanna" is brought into English as "Save now, I pray" – "Save now, I pray, O LORD" – "Hosanna, O LORD!" It was quite a song and quite a connection for the people to make, whether by coincidence or by divine guidance.

The chief priests and scribes were not happy with the song of the crowd. "Do you hear what these are saying?" they demanded (Mat. 21:16). "Can't You hear how they are referring to You, Jesus? Don't You see that they think You are the Messiah? Tell them to be silent!" (Luke 19:39). But Jesus would not silence them. The people spoke the truth. He was the Messiah, and He had come to save.

But as clearly as the people sang the song of salvation on Palm Sunday, it seems that their initial excitement faded. Maybe their hopes for Jesus were more about social or political progress. But He was entirely focused on the spiritual. Soon Jesus would stand before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and declare, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Joh. 18:36).

So while the people were still excited about Jesus, they weren't sure what good He would do for them. They weren't sure if His arrival would change their lives in any meaningful way. And by the end of the week, He had been crucified, died, and was buried. Did they feel foolish for their Palm Sunday excitement? Had they chosen the wrong song?

It is true for us also that the songs of Christmas and Easter come easily to our lips on those festival days. The reason why Jesus came and what He accomplished seem very clear. But we are unable to keep that festival excitement. The next Sunday doesn't feel the same or the Sunday after that. We are unsure how Jesus' work applies to our work as we clock in and out each day.

So what can happen is a sort of separation, a compartmentalization, between what we believe and what we do, between what happens on Sunday and what happens the rest of the week. We see this in the way people can hold two very different beliefs at the same time. A person might accept the six-day creation at church and the theory of evolution at school. One might accept traditional values about marriage and family at church but support the opposite in society. Another might watch his language around fellow congregation members but let it all fly among his co-workers.

There are different reasons for these inconsistencies. Some of it is fear that others will judge us if come off as "too religious." We want to fit in with others and not stand out. If we did take a stand, we might be uncomfortable trying to defend our beliefs. While it may seem easier for some to speak about Jesus, I'm not sure it is ever easy. What a person believes touches on the deepest parts of who they are. We want our friends to know that Jesus is their Savior, but we also don't want to risk losing them as friends.

At its root, our reluctance to share the Gospel message with others comes from our own weakness. And that is something to both recognize and repent of. What Jesus has done is just as meaningful and life-changing today as any other day. But we treat it as something common. Or we become frustrated because Jesus doesn't seem concerned about the problems in our life and in the world that need fixing.

Like the Palm Sunday crowd found out, Jesus does not give us everything we want. But He does give us everything we need. He did not come to work political or social change. He came to win our freedom from sin, death, and devil. And He accomplished it through sacrifice, the sacrifice of His own holy body on the cross. The people thought their Palm Sunday song had been wasted when Jesus was killed. But actually their song had been answered.

The song of the Passover was fulfilled by *“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”* (Joh. 1:29). Jesus truly was the world’s Messiah, King, and Savior. He is your Savior too. He died to erase all of your sins—the times when your confession of the truth went cold because you were ashamed, the times when the song of salvation was silenced in your heart because you were angry at God, the times when you cared more about the riches and joys of this life instead of the life to come.

Jesus forgives the sins of your yesterdays, your sins of today, and the sins you will commit in the future. He suffered and died for all of them. You may not always think of Him in your day-to-day life, but He is always thinking of you. He wants you to be comforted by His Word of grace and forgiveness whenever you feel guilt and sorrow for your sins. He wants you to be strengthened by His promises whenever you are filled with doubts and faced with difficulties. He wants the song of salvation to play over and over again in your heart and mind, because He came to save you.

What Jesus has done may not shine as brightly or loom as large as it will this Holy Week and on Easter. We may not retain the festival excitement, but we will still have the festival song. Week by week and even day by day, **We Sing the Song of Salvation**. We hear again and again the beautiful words of Jesus’ coming to redeem us. He was willing to die for you and me—even for us weak sinners! And that means He will not abandon us in our weakness.

He still comes to us through His Word and His Sacraments to deliver His forgiveness and life. And we welcome Him here with singing and rejoicing just as the people welcomed Him to Jerusalem: *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”*

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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