

April 5, 2020  
Palm/Passion Sunday

Fourth Sunday of online worship

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**Psalm 118:19-29**  
**Zechariah 9:9-10**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**



**Deliver Us!**

*Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!* – Psalm 118: 25

The psalm we just read together, Psalm 118, was Martin Luther's favorite.

The great reformer spent 10 months hunkered down in a tiny apartment in Wartburg, Germany – sheltering in place, we might say, because the Emperor and the Pope disapproved of the things he was saying about the equality of all people under God, and they put a price on his head.

I can imagine Luther singing the psalm alone in his room. He wrote:

“This is the psalm I love ... it has served me well and helped me out of grave troubles, when neither emperor, kings, wise men, clever men, nor saints, could help me.”<sup>i</sup>

Ancient Israel agreed. Psalm 118 is a thanksgiving song, sung by God's people for thousands of years. The Levites in the temple sang it as they prepared the Passover meal. Families sang it in their homes at the Seder.

“The gates” the psalmist prays that God will open are the gates of Jerusalem. This is a song of faith and freedom, announcing faith that God will again open a way to freedom the same way God opened the sea to free the Israelite slaves long ago!

It's about the new Moses, God's chosen deliverer. On Palm Sunday the people sang it:  
*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna!*

Hosanna is a Hebrew word that means, “We beseech thee! Hear us” and, “Save us! Deliver us! We pray.”

Every single gospel writer says that the crowds sang Psalm 118 as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday.

Here's Matthew's version of the story from chapter 21, verses 1-11.

*When they [that is, Jesus and his disciples] 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.”*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“We beseech thee, hear us!”<sup>ii</sup> People tossed their coats and laid tree branches on the road as Jesus passed. They sang out *Hosanna in the highest heaven!* It means, “With all the power of heaven, deliver us!”

Much of the meaning of Palm Sunday hangs on that one phrase: “Save us! We pray.”

Our prayer is the same as theirs, isn’t it? We are praying, “Deliver us! Save us from this plague that has us locked in our homes, a deadly disease about which we know so little, a pandemic that has our world in its brutal grip: Hosanna, Lord, with all the power of heaven, come and save us, now!”

Palm Sunday is particularly poignant this year. As patients crowd into emergency rooms around the world, hospital administrators scramble for supplies, and health care workers and first responders battle to save as many as possible – all our prayers are the same: “Save us, Lord!”

And he will! By this time next week God will have raised Jesus, assuring our salvation, and confirming, once and forever, that even death cannot confine us.

By this time next week Jesus will have proved that disease and violence have no power to destroy us. By next Sunday Jesus will have shown us that these fragile, mortal bodies we live in must/will “put on immortality”:

*Death has been swallowed up in victory.  
Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting? <sup>iii</sup>*

But Easter is still a week away, And these days a week is a very long time.

I heard a new twist on the old rhyme: Thirty days has September, April, June and November, all the rest have 31, except for March which had 8,279.

A lot will happen in the world, and in Jesus’ story, between now and next Sunday. So do join us by Livestream on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday this week at 7:30 PM...because it would be wrong to skip right from the cheering crowds of Palm Sunday to the triumph of Easter morning without embracing Christ’s commandment to love, and remembering his suffering. It is his life that gives us our victory.

The crowds on the first Palm Sunday could taste it. They knew instinctively...and from all they had seen and heard of Jesus that he was the One who had come in the name of the Lord! The Savior!

”Hosanna, Lord, Save us!”

Their prayer is the same as ours: Deliver us! We are distanced from that crowd by 2000 years, but our need is exactly the same: we are all begging God, “Save us!”

Usually when we hear the word “salvation” our minds immediately go to the salvation of our eternal souls.

Years ago, a guy in an airport asked Baptist minister, Tony Campolo,  
“Are you saved?”  
“Yes!” Tony replied.  
“When were you saved?” The man asked.  
Tony looked the guy straight in the eye and said,  
“Two thousand years ago, on Calvary.”

It’s true! Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior...and yours. That fact is key, but God did more in Jesus than save us from hell. In Jesus God also gave us the ability, the pattern, the best way to guard and protect one another.

THAT is what we are trying with all our hearts to do right now.

Let me give you an example. A pastor colleague of mine did something the pastors also do here at Woods in our confirmation classes. It's called "Stump the Pastor," kind of a youth and pastor Q & A. The youth write down their questions -- about the Bible, faith, the church, really nothing is off limits. They write them down and present them to the pastor, and the pastor does his or her best to answer them.

My colleague, whose name is Scott, received 12 cards and four of them were about salvation. Basically, they asked "Am I saved?" and "Is Jesus the only way to salvation?" Good questions. Scott told the kids that before he could answer their questions, they had to answer one of his. He asked them:

"Since salvation implies that we are being saved *from* something, what do you think Jesus is saving us from?"

The first answer that came back was "Hell." Jesus saves us from Hell. Good answer.

But is that all? Think about it -- if that's the only salvation Jesus gives us, what about love? What about justice? What about hope? If nothing matters except our eternal destination, why do we need the church? Why do our missions exist? Why bother?

So Scott decided to push back on the kids a bit. It was Palm Sunday. He said that this day is all about our need for salvation, but that the crowds lining the streets that day in Jerusalem weren't shouting "Hosanna! Save us from Hell."

The Jews of Jerusalem were pleading with Jesus to save them from the cruelty and oppression of the Roman Empire. Rome had its foot on their necks. They weren't confined to their houses but they certainly weren't free. They were asking Jesus to deliver them.

So Scott said to the kids:

"Let me put it this way, if God was really on the ball, what would God save you from?"

Suddenly the conversation got very, very interesting. One of the youth raised her hand and said, "Death." Somebody else said that God could really help out by saving him from next week's math test. One eighth grader said, "Pressure." Another one said, "Other people's expectations." A shy teen, almost whispering, said, "Fear. I need God to save me from my fears."

Their honesty took Scott's breath away, and it gave him a clear picture of what Hell looks like to a 14-year old, or a 40-year old, or an 84-year old.

Telling this story, Scott wondered: "Can we dip down in our souls this morning and be as honest as those young people?"<sup>iv</sup>

Today when we cry out, "Hosanna, Save us now!"... mostly we mean save us from coronavirus.

That should be our prayer! The Bible tells us that God's power and mercy are wide and long, as deep as the ocean and higher than *the heavens above the earth*.<sup>v</sup> There are destructive forces at work in this world. We can cry out to God. We should cry out: Hosanna, save us!

Save us from exhaustion.  
Save us from despair.  
Save us from the destruction of our economies.  
Save us from selfishness.  
Save our vulnerable ones.

And while you are at it Lord, give us the strength to save one another, by staying home!

Save us from cancers and natural disasters caused by the destruction of the environment. Help us save one another from gun violence and domestic violence, from bitterness and humiliation, and yes, Lord, fear. Save us from fear.

*We beseech thee, hear us!* That's Psalm 118 verse 25.

Do those words sound familiar?

If you were at Woods in 2017 they probably do. In the spring of '17 the Woods Drama Ministry presented "Godspell," Stephen Schwartz's music rendering of the Gospel of Matthew. There's a Palm Sunday scene in "Godspell." It's a crowd scene and it made me feel a little anxious when I watched it again the other day. I wondered how long it would be until we could be close again. Right now it feels like a dream. As I watched I felt a deep longing to be with the church I love.

For now, the video will have to do. So here it is: The Palm Sunday scene from "Godspell." I hope it will help you remember good times too. (Control+click on below)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekVt-sVMcqs>

We beseech thee, hear us!

I read that during the time that Martin Luther was sheltering in place, he learned that his mother was very ill. He grieved that he couldn't go and be with her. The best that he could do was to write to her, and he did, a beautiful letter, including some verses from his favorite psalm. He wrote:

"You know, who is your true center and foundation of your salvation, from whom ... you seek comfort in this and all troubles, namely, Jesus Christ, the cornerstone. He will not waver or fail us, nor allow us to sink or perish, for He is the Savior."<sup>vi</sup>

Can I get an Amen?

We will rise! God's power to raise is greater than this coronavirus' power to destroy. I don't know if I have ever felt the need for salvation more acutely than I do now. That need is an excellent way to enter Holy Week.

Remember: Christ is our Cornerstone, our Savior. So love one another, pray without ceasing: "Hosanna, Lord! Save us!"

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<sup>i</sup> Martin Luther, *The Book of the Psalms*, <https://docecity.com/the-book-of-psalms-psalms-115-a-118.html>

<sup>ii</sup> John-Michael Tebelak, *Godspell*, 1972

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

<sup>iv</sup> Scott Black Johnston, "Save Us" *Day1* radio broadcast, first aired April 5, 2005

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 103:11

<sup>vi</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* <https://www.lutheranhour.org/sermon.asp?articleid=3850>