

Reflecting Jesus – A Palm Sunday Sermon
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Matthew 21:1-17

Every year we begin our confirmation class by asking the students what their big questions are, about God or Faith or Jesus or Religion. We write them on a whiteboard, some we talk about right away and some we promise to discuss by the time the year is over.

I'll bet that you have some of the same questions they do... for example... Do other religions worship the same God? Where is heaven? Why practice religion? (I think they were trying to stump us this year) Is God Batman? And finally, What does it mean that Jesus saves?

It's extraordinary how often the salvation question comes up in one form or another.

A few years ago, I told the class we'd try to answer some of their questions, but it would really help if they could first answer one for me. "Since salvation implies that you are being saved from something, what do you think Jesus is saving you from?" The first answer that came back was "hell." Jesus saves people from hell. But is that the only answer?

Their response was pretty automatic, which made me suspicious. It made me wonder if the confirmands were thinking: "what does Pastor Jenn want to hear me say?"

It's kind of like when I go to see my doctor and she asks me, "So, have you been exercising?" and I know what she wants me to say.

Take, for example, our Palm Sunday text. I don't believe that the people lining the streets of Jerusalem were primarily concerned about being saved from "hell" when they were shouting out "hosanna, save us" to Jesus. The gospels hint at the crowd's motivation, most of the people wanted to be "saved" from the Romans; they wanted deliverance from an occupying army.

So I decided to change tactics to see if I could expand on the concept of salvation. "Let me ask it this way," I said to our confirmands, "if God was looking out for you today, what would God save you from?" Suddenly, our conversation got interesting--very interesting, indeed.

One of the youth raised her hand and said God could really help her out by saving her from an upcoming math test (of course we laughed, wouldn't we all like that?). Then one of the younger ones said, "Pressure." And another said, "My parents' expectations." Then another, shy individual, almost in a whisper said, "Fear. I want God to save me from my fears." All of these answers struck me as more sincere than "hell."

Although, perhaps their answers gave a pretty clear picture of what "hell" looks like to a freshman in high school.

I wonder, can we dip down into our souls and be as honest as these young people were? When we wave our palms today and cry out, "Hosanna," what do we hope God can save us from?

Save me from anger.

Save me from cancer.

Save me from depression.

Save me from debt.

Save me from the strife in my family.

Save me from boredom.

Save me from the endless cycle of violence.

Save me from humiliation.

Save me from staring at the ceiling at three a.m. wondering why.

Save me from bitterness.

Save me from arrogance.

Save me from loneliness.

Save me, God, save me from my fears.

If we approach Palm Sunday from that angle, there is potential for some real depth behind our celebration. If we think of this way, embedded in our quaint pageantry is an appeal to God that originates in the most vulnerable places inside of us. And it bubbles out, almost beyond our control, to the surface. "Hosanna." "Save us." Please, God, take the broken places that

will tear us apart and make them whole. Jump into the water and drag our almost-drowned selves to shore. "Save us." "Hosanna."

The question raised by those confirmands may redeem Palm Sunday from triviality, but it also forces us to engage two important follow-up questions. First, after we ask God to save us, we want to know: Does God respond to our cries? And, second, how?

I want to take my own meager shot at answering them.

But before I do that, I should say that I believe the answer to these questions is embedded in the mystery of this coming week. In other words, maybe the journey from Maundy Thursday through Good Friday and finally to Easter is the closest thing to an answer that we have.

In the crowded, dirty city streets of Jerusalem, the people wanted salvation, which they defined as "freedom from the Romans." When it became apparent that Jesus was not "that kind of Messiah," the people's hope quickly vanished. "Save us," they cried, but Jesus did not set about saving them in a manner that they could recognize. He did not take up a sword and send the Romans fleeing.

Instead, he went and threw a fit at the temple, and then he had supper with his friends; and he went and prayed in a garden. It only took a few days for the crowds to switch from crying "Hosanna" to the shouts of "Crucify him." So, yes, the risk of Holy Week is that we'll take a peek at Jesus' actions and think, "Hmm, this doesn't look much like salvation to me."

I am not completely sure, but I think that part of being saved involves a God who would stoop to step right into the messiest parts of life with us. Let me share with you a story from my own life.

Some of you know that the man who raised me, my dad, adopted me when I was an infant. What you may not know is that I was 12 when I found out. Up until that time, I didn't have a clue. One day my parents sat me down on the living room couch and told me all about it. It's a conversation that I will never forget, because it was a complete surprise.

As they shared details, I learned about the awful truth about how my biological father treated my mother before she had the power to leave him.

After about a half hour, I wasn't sure whether I could stand being with them in that space much longer. Anger, betrayal, sadness swirled within me. I wasn't who I thought I was. Finally, as the conversation ended, they gave me permission to go outside and play.

I ran to my bike and rode it all the way across town to my violin teacher's home (who was also a deacon at my church). As I entered Miss Ann's front door, I crumpled on the floor, a sobbing heaving mess. I'm not even sure to this day how I managed to get there in the state I was in. She scooped me up in her arms and hugged me until my tears were spent.

Miss Ann promised me that it would get better, whatever "it" was. And then she ushered me into a practice room and placed a violin in my hand and encouraged me to "play it out". As I drew my bow across the strings, a peace settled in my heart. It is impossible to describe the power of that moment. I felt... sort of... well... "saved." Miss Ann, on that day, reflected Jesus in the way she cared for me. And I will always be grateful.

You've been there too, haven't you? When people uphold us in our times of great need, isn't that an experience of the holy? This is, in part, how God saves us. God comes. God incarnates. God steps out to stand with us in awkward places at awful times as we experience life and death.

God answers our cries in ways so utterly unexpected that we have got to look (a second time) to see if they can possibly be true.

I wonder... Is there any better way to begin Holy Week than with palms in our hands and "Hosanna" on our lips? Is there any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey than to ask God, out of the deep, honest places inside of us, to "Save us... please, save us"? Amen.