

March 28, 2021 | Journey Worship Service | Palm/Passion Sunday

TEXT: [John 12:9–19](#)

TITLE: Hosannas Echo On

By Kathryn Ophardt

Why do you come to church? There are lots of wonderful answers to this: maybe it's the music, the fellowship, the time set apart to think about God. And now, after spending a year worshipping together virtually, what still makes it worth waking up early to come to church at 8:45 in the morning? Well I can tell you why it's worth it to me. To me, it's worth it for the prayer. Praying together is so special to me. Especially the prayer of intercession! Did you know that that's new to me? In all the other churches I've a part of, the prayer of intercession is written by the pastors and speaks in generalizations, interceding for groups of people, for cities, countries, and the world, and that is all good too. But you all have taught me how to pray for people by name. You have taught me how to pray *with* you, not just *for* you. You have taught me how to hear someone else's prayer request and make it my own whether I know the person or not. You have shown me how it is truly *our* prayer when we say, "God in your mercy, hear *our* prayer," because it is a prayer that we crafted together. For many of us, we haven't even met each other in person, but we have lifted up thanksgiving and laments alike. Everything from births and deaths, health and illness, hope and hopelessness—you have taught me how to share them together by the grace of God as one loving prayer. In midst of all of the isolation that has filled this year, I cherish those moments of solidarity through prayer whether we speak or share groans too deep for words, that only the Spirit can interpret and intercede for.

This is probably not how you expected me to open the sermon on Palm Sunday. Today is a day when we're supposed to sing "Hosanna!" which so often sounds like a song of praise. But "hosanna" means "save us." Remembering this, a pandemic and a world grieving gun violence suddenly seems like the perfect time to sing out hosannas—to sing "Hosanna in the highest!"—to say, "Hey, you, up there, don't forget about us. We still need you...to save us." Actually, thinking about the stories of the Bible, I wonder why we don't hear more people crying out "hosanna." But then I wonder if maybe different people in different places and times have shouted their hosannas in silence, in action, or in other words.

I think that the Gospel of John includes some hosanna cries even before we get to Palm Sunday. The Gospel of John tells the story of the resurrection of Lazarus in chapter 11 and then right in chapter 12, we hear the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Just to remind us all, Jesus was in the town of Bethany before making his way to Jerusalem. While in Bethany, Jesus ran into the sisters, Martha and Mary, who were overwhelmed by grief from the death of their brother, Lazarus. And Martha confronted Jesus saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Maybe this was her crying "Hosanna"—crying "save us!" and laying down her palm branches at Jesus' feet that would lead to her brother's tomb? How often do those words come to us when we encounter pain in our lives or in the lives of loved ones? How often do we think or utter the words, "my sibling—parent—child—friend would not have died—would not have been hurt—would not have suffered if you had only been here, God." These are honest thoughts. And in response, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will

never die.” This is the mysterious way that Jesus responded to Mary and Martha, and I think this is the mystery with which Jesus responds to us too.

Then, if we fast-forward a little bit in the text, it says that when the Jews found out that Jesus was heading into Jerusalem, a big crowd of them gathered, not just to see Jesus, but also to see Lazarus whom he raised from the dead. The people were already longing for a resurrection. They just didn’t know whose. They longed for life, but they didn’t know that death would come first. I wonder how many of the people in that crowd came to see Jesus because they too had lost a loved one whom they longed to see again in this life. How many of them longed for the message that death is not the end of life? How many of them shouted “hosanna” with tears welling up in their eyes and hope overflowing in their hearts?

So, I wonder, on that day we know as Palm Sunday, why did the people lay down their palms? Perhaps they laid down their palms for Jesus, recognizing him as the “King of Israel.” Perhaps they laid down their palms to cover the roads of the Empire and make way for the Reign of God. Perhaps they laid down their palms for Lazarus or because they too hoped for a miracle. Perhaps they laid down their palms for the resurrected, the resurrecting, and the resurrection!

Shouting hosanna is not unique to Palm Sunday. Hosannas are not confined to scripture. But what does hosanna sound like today? When George Floyd cried out for his mother when he was dying under the knee of his oppressor, was that another kind of “hosanna?” When children cry out as they are pulled from their parent’s arms to be kept in separate cages at the border, maybe that is kind of hosanna too. The screams that followed gunshots in Atlanta, Georgia, and Boulder, Colorado, this week, were hosannas that now echo throughout the country, lamenting the pain caused by gun violence. How many hosannas are raised within the walls of a hospital? And how many hosannas are cried from outside on behalf of loved ones whom they cannot even visit? Maybe hosanna is an intercession! And every time we say, “God in your mercy, hear our prayer,” we say not just our hosannas, but those of our neighbor.

Yet, how can we hope that God will save when everywhere we look we see oppression, pain, and suffering? How can we hope that God will save when we live in a world so full of death? **We continue to hope because Jesus Christ carries our hosannas to the cross.** Christ holds our pain, giving us relief from its heavy burden, and then raises us up again and again through Christ’s own resurrection. But first, we have to walk with Jesus to the cross.

Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is a doorway into Holy Week. This story shows us that the people were waiting for a resurrection reality. But this story also shows us that they didn’t expect to have to go to the cross along the way. The Jews laid down their coats and their palm branches to mark the path of Christ, which would become the way of the cross, which God would transform into the way of the resurrection.

Today, I invite you to ponder why you lay down your palm branches, and maybe not just your palms but to lay down your joys, your hopes, your pain, your grief, your exhaustion, your very self as an offering to God. For all of those things were present in Christ’s path to Jerusalem and the days we remember as Holy Week. So, let us

walk in solidarity with Christ who lived and died and rose again in solidarity with humanity. We begin by laying down our palms to make way for the Reign of God, and God is making a way for us to live into that reign in our midst and on those very palms.

May we prepare the way to walk again with Christ down this familiar path. May we lay down our palms and pray “hosanna” for all who are sick, “hosanna” for all who grieve, “hosanna” for all who are oppressed, “hosanna” for all who feel lost, forgotten, or alone. May we cry out “hosanna, save us! For Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.”

Amen