

Hosanna!

Rev. John Allen

I have always experienced Palm Sunday as kind of a mixed up day.

On the surface, it is a street fair, a parade, a jubilant festival praising and adoring Christ. For the disciples it must have felt like the pinnacle of Jesus' movement. Finally, this rag-tag group of fishermen and laborers from Galilee were walking beside their Lord receiving a heroes welcome.

Crowds lay branches and blankets on the street, a gesture reserved for kings, to make easy the way of the humble donkey.

All creation seems to be rejoicing, welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem.

And yet.... we know what happens in Jerusalem. The crowd then did not know what we know now. That Jesus has come to the city to die.

The crowd does not know what we know, that the crowd shouting "hosanna" will soon be replaced by a crowd shouting "crucify him."

We know—what they did not—that this is a festive start, to a week of shadows.

And soon the disciples will find themselves plummeting, from the high of this day, into the deep of betrayal and denial, fear, desperate prayers, and shattered hope.

And we will go there with them... On Thursday, on Friday, we will walk with them through those shadows...

And then too, we will know something that they don't yet. Something they could scarcely believe. Something sometimes we can scarcely believe.

That that cross is not the end it seems to be. That the grave will not hold Jesus long. That God's love will speak louder than the worst pain the world can inflict.

Its a roller-coaster. For them. For us.

And it starts with this mixed up day.

And this year—at least of me—that mixed up feeling really fits.

After all here we are, our 55th livestream service. Over a year of worshipping connected by camera and screen.

And yet there is a palpable home in the air. My social media feeds these days are flooded with photos of friends and family being vaccinated. Each one of those photos is like a little booster shot of hope to me. I watch numbers and graphs that once seems to unstopably soar, settle.

And many of us are, I think for the first time, allowing ourselves to believe that the end really is in sight.

But it's mixed up.

The hope is still mixed up with fear that, maybe not, maybe cases will surge again...

The hope is mixed up with grief, that even if things continue to improve at this pace, tens of thousands will still die, before this is truly behind us.

We are at a Palm Sunday moment of this pandemic. Definitive hope ahead, enough to celebrate now, but a chasm of sorrows between then and now...

So if you have been feeling all mixed up. Its not just you. And it makes total sense. This is a mixed up moment. Just like Palm Sunday, it doesn't have to just be one thing. It can be grief and hope, longing and fear, trepidation and confidence, all at the same time.

Its mixed up.

Which brings me to this word. "Hosanna."

A word we have said and sung, year after year, shouted along with the crowd as we wave our branches.

What does it mean?

Well it's hard to say. It's not a word that we use in our everyday life. But in Jesus time it may have been kind a generic word of acclaim, like: bravo! or hooray!

What does hooray mean? Where did it come from. I bet most of us don't know, but we know how to use it.

Hosanna may have been a word like that. A well known shout of acclaim and celebration.

Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

The difference is that, hosanna *does* mean something. Not the everyday language of the people, but in ancient Hebrew, which was closely related.

Hosanna.

It means: "save us."

There is no question that this word was being used as a jubilant cheer, a celebratory acclamation of praise and joy.

But at its heart it is a plea.

Almost as if there is a river of grief beneath that joy. A current of longing that makes the celebration feel all the more essential. That makes the praise feel like a matter of life and death.

This man riding into the city on a donkey. He is not just someone whom they praise and adore. He is someone they need. He is the answer to their most heartfelt prayer.

Hosanna.

Praise and plea. All mixed up, in one word.

We are poised on the edge of something right now. It will not just be a simple return to the world as it was. We are on the edge of stepping out of our homes and into a world that has been remade by suffering.

I don't think any of us yet can quite imagine what it would be like to shake a stranger's hand in this new world let alone what a dance floor will feel like.

We are poised on the edge of a reunion, with those whose lives have been remade by grief, whose bodies and minds have worn tremendously since we were last together.

I expect that we will feel mixed up.

That we will encounter old friends with joy that feels as essential as bread.

That we will move through the world with fears that we cannot quite shake.

Although we will struggle to even let ourselves think it, that there are things about this time we will miss.

And there are ways that we have each been changed that we will not notice for years.

It's a good moment for Palm Sunday.

It's a good moment to shout our praise with full voice, and dance, and rejoice, knowing that this joy is fed by the depth of our need.

And it will be a good year to remember too, that in the mixup of hope and fear. In the ambivalence we will feel about human touch. In our awkwardness. In our grief. In our tears that are a messy mix of relief and anguish.

We can know that God's love, justice, peace, and hope, comes last and loudest of all.

In the meantime. We cry: "hosanna!"