

Rev. Danny Mackey
Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion
March 25, 2018
John 12:12-19
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel” (Jn 12:13).

He came as a King. A humble King. A victorious King. A King of peace. A beggar-king on a borrowed donkey. That is the Jesus of Palm Sunday. This King enters His capitol city, Jerusalem, for the Passover.

Jesus had his disciples borrow a donkey from someone, and sitting atop the borrowed donkey, He rode into Jerusalem like a king. St. John says that the people took palm branches and formed a welcome procession along the road. They waved their palm branches in the air and chanted verses from Psalm 118: “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel.” And so the stage was set. Holy Week had begun. Jesus, King David’s promised Son, the messiah-King had come to His city, and His city welcomed Him.

Every detail of this parade was important—the donkey, the palms, the hosannas. The donkey was an animal of peace, humble compared to the horse, which was what you rode when going to war. Jesus came in peace and humility. He was going to Jerusalem for war, not against the city but against death and the devil. This was not the kind of war fought with the standard issue weapons of this world. Every other king sends soldiers out into battle to fight for him. Every earthly king expects his subjects to die for him. But this King lays down His life for His people. He enters the battlefield alone, riding an animal of peace. The battlefield is the city, Jerusalem, the place of sacrifice. He heads to the cross to die with the burden of the world’s sin riding on his back.

He comes in peace to break the bow and shatter the spear. The violence of this world, the hatred and the anger that rages within us and lashes out in the direction of others, was focused upon Him. The wrath of God against our rebellion was trained on Him. “By His stripes we are healed.” His punishment brings us peace. His cross means that God is for us, on our side, on good terms with us. We are reconciled, at one, at peace. We have peace with God through Jesus Christ. And we have peace with one another.

The donkey is borrowed. The Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator of the universe, has to bum a ride. It's not what you and I would expect of greatness. We look for success and power in our leaders. But greatness in God's kingdom is not defined in terms of surplus but sacrifice, not power but poverty, not haughtiness but humility. Jesus is the king of the least, the lost, the lowly—a beggar King in a kingdom of beggars.

The palm branches speak of victory, triumph, celebration, joy. In the culture of Jesus' day, palm branches were the ticker tape and the confetti, the fireworks and the victory sign, the flagpole and the flapping W. Palm branches were for victorious kings coming home from battle. The enemy is defeated. The good guys have won. Let's throw a parade! "With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar" (Ps 118:27). But wait a minute! The celebration seems a bit premature here, doesn't it? The decisive battle hasn't yet been fought. The cross lies at the end of the road for Jesus. The victory party is supposed to be next Sunday, not this Sunday. And yet already here He is greeted at the conquering hero, the victor King in anticipation of his victory. Leave it to the Lord to celebrate His victory a week early.

That's also the way of faith in King Jesus. We celebrate the victory before the battle's over, because we already know who won the war. "Thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." We face uncertainty and death every day. Every day we draw closer to our last breath and to the world's last day. Each day brings its own problems and challenges, its disasters and disappointments. Each day we are tempted to doubt the victory of King Jesus, to live as if Jesus had not conquered death, to live in denial of His life at work us.

Each day brings a little bit of death our way. Yet in the foolishness of faith we are given to rejoice and shake our fist in the face of death. "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things! The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things." We know how it all ends. It ends with the coming of Jesus, the One who was slain but lives, the One who died and rose again. It ends with our rising of the dead in the power of His resurrection. It ends with eternal life for all who trust in Jesus in this life. We wave palm branches today, knowing that Jesus' death is our death through holy Baptism, that His life is our life, that He is strong to save, that He has conquered all things for us, that whatever may

happen to us we have eternal life in His name and that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ.

The victory belongs to Jesus. That's what the palm branches preach. Here is a king you can count on, when all other would-be kings fail you. Here on the donkey is the One who healed the sick and cast out demons and made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the mute to speak, who raised the dead. Here is the One who hung dead on a cross for you so that you might live under Him in His kingdom. There is no other king like Jesus.

The shouts of Hosanna! tell us that Jesus is our Savior King. "Hosanna" is a Hebrew word. It means "Lord save." "Hosanna! O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success. Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord." (Ps 118:25). The person who is drowning and about to go under cries out, "Help, save me!" The person whose life is in desperate danger dials 911 and says, "Save me." Hosanna! Save us now, Lord!

Save us from what? Sin, death, and devil—to name the big unholy three. Hosanna! Jesus saves us from our sin by becoming sin for us. He saves us from death and hell by dying for us. He saves us from the devil by doing battle with the devil for us. Hosanna! It is our hymn of praise on the highway, in the home, in the hospital. Hosanna! We shout it in our neighborhoods and our nation. Hosanna! We sing it in our churches into the deepest recesses of our lives. Save us, Lord. Save us from the sin that weighs us down and keeps us from reflecting your love in our lives. Save us from the death that dogs us to the grave, that causes us to fear, to doubt your victory and your goodness. Save us from the devil, who prowls around like a lion trying to devour us. Save us most of all from ourselves, because left to ourselves, we would be lost forever.

Hosanna is a prayer of the penitent, the cry of someone who has nothing, whose hands are empty, whose heart is crushed, whose spirit is broken and in despair. And this humble King who rides into Jerusalem hears our Palm Sunday Hosannas and He turns them into Easter alleluias. He takes our Hosannas with Him to His cross and nails them there. Hosanna! means "Do something." Jesus did. He died and rose again.

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Sing and raise your palm branches high, O Church of Christ. Behold your King comes to you." He comes to us still, here and now, in the way of Palm Sunday. His city is the Church, the daughter of Zion. His donkey is the humble bread and wine, borrowed from us for His use. They are the

vehicles that bring Him to us to save us. One difference: He doesn't come to die again. That He did once for all, nearly two thousand years ago. He comes now to bless, to feed us with the fruits of His saving death: His Body broken for us, His Blood shed for us. These gifts He gives as our victorious King of peace, to reign over us with His death and resurrection. Until He comes in glory, we proclaim His death to each other and to the world in which we live, by eating the bread that is His Body and drinking the wine that is His Blood.

In the liturgy, we are Jerusalem that greeted him. We too chant Hosanna! It is the song of the Church welcoming her King who comes in His Supper. We sing the very same thing every Sunday that the people sang in Jerusalem the Sunday Jesus came riding on a donkey. Our Hosannas confess our belief that Christ really does come to us, that He is really present in His Supper with His Body and His Blood to save us. Today, as we sing Hosanna! to the King who comes to us in His holy Supper, take those palm fronds you have with you and wave them once more in the air. With palm branches and chanted Hosannas, welcome your humble, beggar, Savior, victor King who comes to save you.

“Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.