

I grew up in the Baptist Church and I loved Palm Sunday as a kid...it was one of the few times in the year that the church got a little liturgical. The teachers would line up all the Sunday School children with huge palm branches, not just one little leaf, but with big palms that we could wave in the air. We would process into the church at some point in the middle of the service waving our branches and singing and shouting "Hosanna!" There was excitement in the air and the feeling that Easter was almost here. It was a celebratory service in every sense.

The first time I went to a Palm Sunday service at an Episcopal Church, however, I was sorely confused by the fact that the service was not just about Palm Sunday: they had sneaked in this long Passion reading in the middle of it, making it a confusing service: I wondered - what are we really commemorating? Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem or the Passion and Good Friday? Later I figured it out: the Episcopal Church combines these two events on Palm Sunday because we Episcopalians are notoriously "Sunday only" types. The Church is baby-sitting us, because the church doesn't think everyone is going to come back for Good Friday and hear and meditate on the Passion, the church thinks we're going to go straight from the feel-good celebration of Palm Sunday to the feel-good celebration of Easter, and miss the whole extremely important crucifixion piece in between. So, they snuck the Passion into our Palm Sunday liturgy. At least that way if you're here today, you'll get a little dose of Good Friday. To say this has annoyed me over the years would be an understatement. But, I get it. I really do. People are busy. And yet every year I still hope that everyone will come back on Thursday night and on Good Friday, because it is a powerful and wonderful thing to focus on God's love and work on the cross during Holy Week.

Since the early days of the Church, Holy Week has been a part of our commemorations, beginning in Jerusalem, and it always begins with Palm Sunday. It is the one and only time that Jesus allowed himself, in his earthly ministry, to be publicly recognized, acknowledged, and praised as the Messiah, the King who has come from God in the line of David. And he had a large and excited following, he was at the pinnacle of his popularity and influence. And this crowd, who is expecting a warrior king type of

Messiah to rescue them for their enemies thinks that maybe Jesus really is God's chosen and anointed One, the Messiah, who is there to save them. That's why they shout:

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Does this sound familiar to you from our liturgy? We say or sing this very phrase every single Sunday at a certain point in our service during the Eucharist in the Sanctus, after the words "Holy, holy holy." "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." If you haven't thought about what you're saying at that moment for a while, I want you to really ponder today what you're proclaiming when we get to that point later. You are saying something quite incredible, just as the crowd did then. "Hosanna" comes from a Hebrew word that originally meant "Save us!" But over time, the meaning began to shift, as if the prayer for salvation had been immediately answered the moment it was spoken. The term came to mean, not "Save us," but "Salvation has come!" It moved from a plea to a praise, from a cry to a confidence. And this shift in meaning is a beautiful reminder that God in fact does hear our prayers and is in the process of responding to them even as we speak them, even before we speak them. Hosanna: God save us! Hosanna: Salvation has come! And salvation has come in Jesus. And then we bless Jesus as the One who has come in the Name of the Lord, the one who is the king in the lineage of David. "Hosanna in the highest heaven." This phrase means, "Salvation has come and all the angels of heaven rejoice!" It is fundamentally a statement of faith and assurance in God through Jesus, who is indeed our salvation.

But, we all know that this song of high praise on Palm Sunday quickly turned and the crowds sang a very different tune on Good Friday. They ceased to say "Hosanna" to Jesus and instead yelled, "Crucify him." Why such a sudden change? Well, Jesus didn't match their expectations of what the Messiah would or should be. Sometimes God doesn't match our expectations of what we think God should do or be either. But we are called to be different, unlike the Palm Sunday crowd, to allow God to be God, regardless of what we think God should be doing or how God should be acting. If we don't allow God to

be God in all the mystery that entails, including when our prayers aren't answered the way we would like, then we too run the risk of turning on Jesus...our Hosannas can turn into judgment and then condemnation.

The crowd that day had a very limited perspective, because, in fact, God had something far bigger in mind for them than merely giving them a temporary earthly king. But they couldn't see that then, they couldn't see that God was about reconciling the whole world throughout time and place and not just defeating their immediate enemies but defeating evil and death itself. They didn't get it. Our perspective is equally limited at times because we don't often see the big picture either, we too are limited.

And so, the challenge for us today is to remain humble and faithful enough to wait and see what God has in mind. To remember that God has a bigger dream than we do, a greater plan than we can see right now. And God's ways are not our ways. In affirming that basic truth then, our Hosannas become faith-filled. And the fact is, you and I can shout "Hosanna" together and mean it because, friends, it is true: salvation has come, it is here, it is now....it's just that no one expected it to come through suffering and death on a cross. That is the beauty and mystery of it: Salvation has come! Hosanna to God in the Highest.

AMEN.