

5 April 2020
Palm Sunday / Sunday of the Passion

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Hosanna!”

Text: John 12:12-19; Matthew 26-27; Isaiah 50:4-9a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Imagine what the day will be like when all these virus restrictions are lifted. When we are able to go back to our lives as usual. Church as usual. Sports. Games. Parks. Libraries. Work. People outside. Social gatherings. Parties. Celebrations. People throwing off their breathing masks. The joy . . . it'll be like . . . Palm Sunday! The first one.

Hosanna! Save now. Yes, that's the cry of many these days, too. Save us from this terrible plague. On that first Palm Sunday, though, it was from the Romans that the people wanted saving. The Roman domination of their land. The Roman restrictions placed upon them. The heavy thumb of the Romans pressing down. They'd had enough. And if Jesus really was the Messiah God sent to restore Israel . . .

So they wave palm branches. They throw off their cloaks onto the ground. Overwhelming joy that the time had come.

But by the end of the week, as we will hear again now in a few moments, Rome was still Rome, and still in control. Their Messiah was dead. Nothing had changed. Or maybe Rome got even more heavy-handed. And their joy turned into bitter disappointment.

What will happen when this pandemic is over? After the celebrations? Our national debt will be worse. Politics will return with a vengeance with the election in the Fall. The problems and challenges we had that were forced into the background during this pandemic will surface again. Maybe nothing will have changed. Or maybe it will be worse. And for some - for many? - there will be bitter disappointment.

But after that first Palm Sunday and the week that ended in bitter disappointment, the Church had a message to proclaim. It simply was *not true* that nothing had changed - for *everything* had changed! Yes, Rome was still there and our national problems will still be there, and maybe worse, but an even greater freedom had been won. Not Rome's rule **but death's rule** was now over. Sin no longer defines us, forgiveness does. And the tyrant who has tried to rule us and our world ever since the beginning has now been dealt a death blow.

And so the week that started with joy but ended in sadness turns to joy again. And that is the message we have to proclaim to a world that is feeling the pall of sin and death once again, and crying out for saving. There is salvation. Jesus fulfilled those *Hosannas*. He rose from the dead to give us life, and to give us joy - not just here for a little while, but joy eternal. Joy that our Father in heaven knows we need.

For none of this is a surprise to God. He knew how sin would savage our world. He knew the strife and murders and wars that would come. He knew the diseases, pestilence, and plagues that would strike us. He knew the sadness and division that would result. He knew the havoc and destruction that would be caused in our world and to our lives. That's why He warned our first parents against bringing sin and death into the world. You don't want this. We don't want this. But this we did.

God knew that too. Parents don't stop their children from making mistakes, but are there for them when they do. So, too, our Father in heaven. And so even before He breathed life into Adam and built Eve from his side, he planned for this week now upon us. When all the strife, murders, and wars, all the diseases, pestilence, and plagues, all the sadness, division, and sin, when all the havoc and destruction caused by our sin would be gathered up in one spot, and placed on one man. A burden so crushing He would cry out from under it, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*" "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

But even in that cry, hope. MY God. He is still our God, even in this world of sin and death. Our God who died for us in answer to our cries of *Hosanna* from under our burdens. To save us and give us hope and joy. For we are not alone in them. And though we live in the midst of difficulty now, the heavy thumb of sin and death have been lifted. So while these things are still realities in our lives, they can not, they will not, win. And when our King returns visibly again, on the Last Day, there will be shouts of joy again. Not of *Hosanna* - He's done that already. But of that word that we have fasted from this Lenten season, the one that starts with the letter "a," and that we will shout out and sing out in joy again next Sunday. And one day, forever.

But not yet. Now we must hear the story again, of our *Hosanna*-ing - of our salvation. The story of betrayal and denial, but also of faithfulness and prayer. The story of the New Testament in Jesus' blood, given then, given now. The story of arrest and willing humility, of false witnesses and proclaimed truth. The story of one life given in love and one life that ended in despair. The story of the innocent condemned and the guilty set free - which is our story, too. The story, of the people crying out, "*His blood be on us and on our children!*" not knowing how true that must be. The story of men flogging and mocking their God, of creatures crucifying their Creator. And their Creator not smiting them back, wanting not to avenge Himself but to forgive them! The story of how creation reacted in horror when its Creator died, when creation was smarter than man. The story of a hasty and less-than-proper burial, like many will be in the world in these days,

weeks, and months ahead. This story we know so well, yet we must hear. This story of the love of God for you.

The prophet Isaiah said to us today, ***The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.*** This story is the word we have been given to sustain the weary, give hope to the hopeless, life to the dying, and joy to the world. That when this pestilence and plague is over - and now I do not mean the coronavirus - we will have joy unequalled and life that will never end.

Until that day, we have another word, too, to sustain the weary and give strength to the weak. *I forgive you all your sins. This is My Body, this is My Blood. You are My child. I will never leave you or forsake you. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Jesus' words. The ones He speaks to us now in answer to ***our Hosannas***. Words that are not just words, but words that do what they say. Words that give the gifts they promise. Even now. Even in this time.

Because the *Lamb Went Uncomplaining Forth, the guilt of sinners bearing* (LSB #438). This time is going to end - and I do not mean the time of this virus. And then,

*Lord, when Your glory I shall see
And taste Your kingdom's pleasure,
Your blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure!
When I appear before Your throne,
Your righteousness shall be my crown;
With these I need not hide me,
And there, in garments richly wrought,
As Your own bride shall we be brought
To stand in joy beside You* (LSB #438, v. 4).

So let us hear now the story again. The story of our hope. The story of His love.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.