

“A Forgiving Spirit”

Matthew 21:1-11

Part VII of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”

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April 2, 2023

From the Pulpit

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O Ever-present and Ever-near God, come to us now. Speak to us and touch us through Your Word and the words that You place on each of our hearts this day. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You, and honor You, and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen

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Well, here we are, on this sixth Sunday in Lent, on this Palm Sunday *and* Passion Sunday.

Looking back over these past six weeks it certainly **HAS** been a remarkable journey that we have been on – together – throughout this Lenten season so far!

As a congregation, we have been having a deliberate conversation about the meaning of forgiveness:

- forgiveness within our personal lives,
- forgiveness in our life together as a church,
- and forgiveness in the world around us.

And, for the past five Sundays of Lent, we have been inspired and challenged by the preaching of several of our First Church clergy:

- On Ash Wednesday, **Rev. Tim** introduced our Lenten theme of forgiveness through his heartfelt message.
- On the first Sunday in Lent, the **Rev. Amanda Conley** reminded us that introspection and then, confession, ultimately leads us to seek forgiveness.
- The following week, **Rev. Tim** stressed that forgiveness necessitates a letting go

of the grudges and the hurts that we tend to hold on to.

- You'll also recall that the **Rev. John Aeschbury** challenged us to think in much broader terms and consider the need for debt forgiveness throughout our society.
- And then, the **Rev. Sarah Reed** inspired us to truly see – and accept – the woundedness in one another – that we would then be better able to understand and forgive each other.
- And then, last Sunday, through stories from his ministry, the **Rev. Larry Miller** emphasized that it is the indwelling of God that prompts us to seek and offer forgiveness to one another as Christians.

And so, these past five weeks of reflection and self-examination have finally led us to this time – to this Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday worship service – and so, we give thanks for this intentional journey that we have been on together in order to understand ***our* need for forgiveness** in our lives.

Now, the mood of *this* Palm Sunday service, so far, has been upbeat – and even joyful – as we have waved our palms in the air – and as we have lifted our shouts of praise by singing the beloved hymns, “All Glory, Laud and Honor” and “Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates.”

And, in our **first** reading from Matthew, chapter 21, this morning, we are reminded of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem while the crowds were shouting:

“Hosanna, hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“Hosanna,” they called out, “Hosanna!”

Hosanna?! Have you ever wondered what that word, *hosanna*, actually means? Was it only used as a joyful expression – or as a word of praise? Or was it something else?

Biblical scholars today seem to agree that the word, *hosanna*, is derived from the biblical Greek word, ὡσαννά, (pronounced “Ho-san-NAH”) which many believe is the transliteration of two Hebrew words – אָן-עֲשׂוּהָ – which means “yaw-SHA” which means “to save or deliver” – and “awn-NAH” which means, “please, I beseech.”

So, with that in mind, then, it may be that the largely peasant crowds that lined the road that day in Jerusalem were actually crying out to Jesus, saying:

“Help us, we beg you, please deliver us, save us!”

Hosanna, hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!

Now, you may remember a ground-breaking book about Holy Week that was published over 15 years ago. It was written by two Biblical scholars, John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg. It is titled: *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*.

In this book, Crossan and Borg make the case that there was a **domination** system in place in Jerusalem during Jesus’ time – which was characterized by political oppression and economic exploitation of the most vulnerable among them.

Borg and Crossan also emphasize in this book that Jesus was, indeed, sharply critical of the religious leaders of the day, given their close relationships and collaboration with the rulers in power of that time.

And so, keeping all of that in mind, what was the response of the people (who were oppressed) as Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem that day?

They cried out:

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!

(Or in other words: Help us, save us, deliver us!)

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!

And what about today?

What is **our** response to the active and felt presence of Jesus in our lives – even in the midst of so much pain and suffering and injustice in the world?

- For the senseless loss of life that is caused by gun violence and for the all-too-frequent mass shootings – even as we mourn the recent loss of life of children and adults at the Covenant Christian School in Nashville this past week.

We cry out: ***Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!***

- For the lives lost and upended by the recent tornados this past week in Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, and Illinois – and the growing concerns about climate change.

We cry out: ***Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!***

- for our transgender children and youth across our nation who continue to be targeted by legislators for political gain.

We cry out: ***Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!***

- and for the more than 50,000 low-income families, right here, in Franklin County, who are spending half or more of their paychecks on housing.

We cry out: ***Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!***

On this HOLY day of worship – on this Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday – we are painfully reminded, once again, of all the suffering and brokenness in the world as we remember the suffering and the brokenness of Jesus' body on the cross.

And so,
for now,
we weep.

And we pray.

And we wait on God to act through us – together – as the Body of Christ.

Amen.

