

Palms and Passion Sunday. It's like Holy Week compressed into one service and more. It's all summarized in this one Palm Sunday word: Hosanna! It means "save us, Lord." It's what you shouted to the King as he rode through the city. Hosanna! Save us! It was a shout of confidence in the King, and when that confidence is in King Jesus, it's not misplaced. Jesus came to save. His name embodies salvation. He rode into Jerusalem that day to save.

The palm scattered road is the road of our Lord's humbling for our salvation. He came as the Suffering Servant who came not to be served by others but to serve others in laying down His life as a ransom, to purchase and win humanity from its enslavement to sin and death, to pay the ultimate price in obedience to God's Law by taking the wages of our sin upon Himself.

This is the road of our Lord's Passion - His passion to save you, who for the joy set before Him, the joy of saving you personally, the joy of raising you up from the death of your sins, the joy of bestowing life on the world and reconciling all things to the Father, endured the cross and scorned its shame.

The road begins at the city gate of Jerusalem. A borrowed donkey in fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Scattered coats and branches pave the highway ahead of Him. Shouts of Hosanna! greet Him. Messianic expectation is thick in the air. Those shouts of Hosanna! may have meant something other than "save us from sin and death." They may have been a call to arms, to revolt against Rome.

Hosanna! may very well have been a call to holy war. And there is truth in that. Jesus came to fight a holy war. Not against flesh and blood, but to win flesh and blood. Not against a group of people, but to rescue humanity from itself and the deep corruption of its sin that drives us all to our death, to the grave, to hell. His holy war was against the spiritual forces of darkness that rule this world. And so He enters His holy city as a conquering King to be conquered, a King riding majestically to His death.

Yes they needed a deliverer, just not what they were looking for. This struggle against the forces of darkness is tiresome in this life. But the fact of the matter is you'll never get out of the Church Militant alive. It is either desertion to the dark side, a wearied giving-in, or it is promotion to the Church Triumphant where sin will harass you no more. Thus Luther wrote, "When Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' He willed that the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Repentance and faith are synonymous. Faith is a life-long struggle against the powers of darkness. It is deliberate and on-going strife against temptation. It is falling again and again, being bruised and beaten, but then being miraculously picked up, brushed off, encouraged, strengthened. Your sins, your failings, your falling into temptation, your sinful self is forgiven. Confession and absolution are the constant and consistent rhythm of our lives in Christ.

And so he rides, His road leads through the city streets of Jerusalem, paved with the blood of the prophets. It was not fitting for a prophet to die outside of Jerusalem, Jesus once said. That's why He came to Jerusalem, knowing that His disciples' Hosannas would be turned into shouts of "Crucify Him!" on the lips of the religious leaders of Jerusalem.

The day begins in triumph. Hosannas and palm branches. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Kind of fun, isn't it? Who doesn't love a parade? The King is coming! Hosanna to the Son of David!

The air was crackling with energy. The crowds they greeted Jesus when He entered Jerusalem were ready for a scrap. In addition to palms there were probably swords and weapons. They wanted holy war, and Jesus was their man. "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!"

He rides that day knowing full well what is in store, what our rebellion will cost Him. He will drink the cup of wrath from His Father's hand. He will suffer in the agony of His soul for the sins of the whole world. He who knew no sin will become sin. Justice will be met in Him. The Father will forsake His Son. He will die. And - and never, never leave this part out - He will rise again, triumphant over the grave. Death will die. Life will live!

Death is dead. The grave is empty.

Now, this conquering Hero over death has not left us on our own. He who rode into Jerusalem, rides still. For on the night in which He was betrayed, the night before He gave His Life, He gave the substance of that Life to His disciples, and to us. Yes, the Blood He shed on Calvary, the Blood that washes sinners clean, He distributes now in the Chalice, and makes you one with Him. You cannot travel across time and go to the cross. How will your sins be washed away in His Blood? This way: He brings the benefits of the cross, He brings His Blood, His Life, to you in the Holy Communion. The Blood that soaked the soldier's spear, the Blood that dripped into the ground of Gethsemane, the Blood that His broken heart ceased to pump, is in the Cup. Until He comes again, He comes now in this, the very thing He has given us to do. And in this He delivers unto us the benefit of His Cross, the forgiveness of our sins. Thus we proclaim, and participate in, the death of Jesus Christ. His death liberates us from death and Hell. It marks us as His own. The angel of death passes over. We are spared by this Blood. It is the Life substance of the Incarnate One which we drink. He who rode into Jerusalem by lowly donkey and her colt that blessed Sunday before His death, rides again today. He rides into our midst by the lowly means, in common things, in bread and in wine.

Passion: Intense zeal, emotion, anger, love. Here the King rides, "no greater love than this that he lays down his life," suffering and death, martyrdom. The Passion of our Lord is His passion to save you.

With this celebration we embark upon our holiest observance, our holiest week. May it be unto us a call to repentance and to life, a blessing, a bestowal of God's Grace, a godly remembrance and proclamation of how just much He has and does love us.

And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Hosanna! Oh Christian, rejoice! Death is dead. Life lives. The grave is empty. Praise God! Our Hallelujahs draw near. Amen.