

Again & Again: We Draw On Courage

Palm Sunday

John 12:1-19
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Do you consider yourself a courageous person? How do you define courage? How do you access it? What events in your life have required the most courage?

Courage, according to one definition, is **the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, confront, and withstand danger, fear, pain, or difficulty instead of withdrawing from it. It also can involve resisting opposition.** (Merriam-Webster)

While courage enables a person to bravely face things that are perceived as frightening, it doesn't necessarily mean that fear isn't involved. This understanding of courage certainly applies to Jesus and his disciples as they faced one conflict after another throughout their ministry. It most definitely applies to them as Jesus rode a donkey on his final journey into the city of Jerusalem.

Courage can also describe those who gathered along the road to wave palm branches as they passed by. I have come to realize we often get what is called Palm Sunday wrong. It's most often portrayed as a joyous and triumphal procession, like we do at the beginning of this service each year. But that is most likely an incomplete description. And that stems from how the word "**hosanna**" is most often defined. **We basically think it means something more in line with a rambunctious hallelujah! But that's not what the original Hebrew word, and later the Aramaic and Greek word, hosanna means. The root word involves two parts. The first, "to save or deliver", the second, "to beseech".** Hosanna literally means "please save us", or "we beg to be saved". Hosanna, then, is a plea to cause or bring about salvation. And we're talking about in the here and not, not in the hereafter.

That puts a much different spin on the motivation and actions of the crowd that came out to greet and encounter Jesus that day. So, let's look at Palm Sunday from that perspective. I am deeply grateful for the poignant and poetic liturgy written by **Sarah Are**, which we have been using throughout this season of Lent in our services of worship. Serving as a Presbyterian pastor in Dallas, she is the liturgical contributor to the resource entitled, *Again & Again: A Lenten Refrain*, produced by the group she helped co-found, A Sanctified Art. **She expresses the misunderstanding of combining hallelujah with hosanna in the Prayer of Confession** we recited together earlier in this service. It bears repeating. Listen for the transition in understanding Palm Sunday.

God of palm branches and hallelujahs:

We confess—we love a good Palm Sunday celebration.

We love the sound of a joyful parade.

We love shouting, "hallelujah!"

We love that Palm Sunday means Easter is just around the corner.

We love good news.

However, if we slow down and pay attention,
 We know that Palm Sunday was not a walk in the park for you.
 There was risk. There was fear. There was the threat of violence.
 You were leading a peaceful protest against an unjust empire,
 And the whole world knew it.
 Forgive us for glossing over the courage this day took.
 Remind us that the story of faith is a story of courage,
 And even we can do hard things.
 With hope we pray. Amen.

Yes, Jesus exhibited great courage knowing what he was about to face in Jerusalem. But again, the crowd also exhibited courage. Writing the biblical commentary on today's Gospel reading from John 12 in that Lenten resource, the Rev. Denise Anderson, former Co-Moderator of the General Assembly of the PCUSA in 2016, and now the Coordinator for Racial and Intercultural Justice with the Presbyterian Mission Agency in our national office, redirects the traditional understanding of Palm Sunday this way.

On Palm Sunday, we remember that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not a risk-free, palm party. **It was a protest parade—a protest against those in power, a parade to prepare the way for a different kind of king.** And this was all happening with plots to kill Lazarus (and Jesus) building in the background. We're reminded that **the crowds were brave to show up that day, and that Jesus drew on courage to face his journey to the cross...** Courage is deep within us; drawing on courage is both internal and external. We often find it when we most need it, when everything else has been stripped away.

Let me ask, have you found that to be true in your life experience, finding the courage necessary when it was most needed, perhaps when reaching the end of your rope? Rev. Anderson continues:

Everything is now set in motion. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a spectacle. **It's a protest, a counternarrative to the Empire's extravagance and repression.** It happens opposite the Roman governor's own parade into Jerusalem for the Passover. It's the people's declaration of a different reign. The use of a donkey is Messianic imagery. This is political theater, and it would ramp up the plots against Jesus' life...

When we consider the full Palm Sunday picture, these are frightful times. So much is happening that is both hopeful and terrifying. Tensions and tears are plentiful. But the Word will remind us to "take heart. **Again and again, we take heart amid the drama.** The script is unsettling, but we have not yet reached "The End."

In her poem "Peaceful Protest", Sarah Are wonders what Jesus must have been experiencing internally as he rode into Jerusalem that day. It concludes these words:

...time has taught us
 That it is not uncommon
 For a peaceful protest
 To start or end
 With an unjust death.

Hosanna is a theological assertion that we want salvation from the powers that be, the powers of an empire (our empire) steeped in dominance, control, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. Hosanna isn't a joyous shout of praise, **it's a protest call to change the status quo – then and now.** In the Hebrew Scripture, our Old Testament, Psalm 118:25-26 declares, "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The author of the Gospel of John quotes and translates this passage, stating, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel" (12:13). With that, **Steve Garnaas-Holmes** puts it beautifully in a poem, entitled, "**Hosanna**".

"Hosanna" doesn't mean "Hooray!"

It means "Save us!"

It's not a cry of triumph,
 it's a plea in desperation.
 Of course, aimed at a leader who can protect us,
 it becomes an affirmation.
 Our Hosannas signify victory
 only because Jesus has saved us
 in our desperate weakness.
 This is no time to strut
 but to kneel,
 to bare our tender need,
 in honest pleading
 that we still need saving,
 and in awe and gratitude
 for the grace we are continually given.
 Maybe "Hosanna" is more like
 "Wow! Thanks. We needed that"
 on steroids.

Yes, this procession into Jerusalem was religious in nature, but it was also political. Any attempt to challenge the status quo is, and that takes courage, grounded in knowing God is with us and for us.

- Would we have had the courage to join the crowd in shouting hosanna in that protest parade back then?
- Do you and I, do we as College Hill, have the courage to join in that protest call today?

Amen.