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Matthew 21:1-11

Psalm 22

Matthew 27:32-54

## NOT GODFORSAKEN

It is always a joy to lift up Hosannas and to wave palm branches on Palm Sunday. Such expressions of adoration are tied to what happened on that first Palm Sunday. But we also focus today on what happened the Friday after Palm Sunday, when Jesus was crucified, as we go from Hosanna to heartbreak, from triumph to tragedy. We have this dual focus today because next Sunday is Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. But that resurrection celebration is less real if we don't ever acknowledge the death of our Lord. We address that important part of the gospel narrative today.

What helps to connect when Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday with when he died on Good Friday is the word, 'Hosanna.' In the original Hebrew, that word, Hoshiana, has two meanings. One is an expression of praise for one who can bring a saving deliverance. That is typically how we use the word. But the other meaning, and one used in Hebrew scripture at times, is a cry, 'Save us!' Hoshiana on Palm Sunday – the people were looking to be saved from the systems of oppression they had known, and they thought the person riding the donkey into Jerusalem, who was entering the holy city in the same way as would a king who came in peace, that rider would be a saving presence for them.

Then on Good Friday, there are expressions about Jesus saving others and himself. They were primarily taunts with cruel intention, but the gospel writer includes them to help us to know that saving action is indeed taking place even as Jesus refuses to save himself and dies on the cross. Hoshiana, Jesus, save us, because we still need saving. Children and adults are gunned down in yet another school and we can't seem to address the root causes that could stop the destructive behavior. Hoshiana, Jesus! Another extensive report about climate change has come out indicating we are doing far too little to address what is leading to the destruction of our own

ecosystem, as part of God's created order. Hoshiana, Jesus! And, of course, we need to be delivered from other self-destructive behaviors that alienate us from God and our neighbors. Hoshiana, Jesus! He comes on a donkey, he hangs on a cross, he engages us even today as a saving presence.

And yet, can this account be in anyway inspirational? After being beaten and flogged, Jesus is too weak to carry his own cross. He is surrounded by those who hurl verbal abuse to go with the physical torture. It's hard to imagine such a level of painful rejection. The only words we hear from Jesus on the cross in Matthew's account is this question in his native Aramaic language: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Can we even call Matthew's account a gospel, a word that means good news? What does it mean that the very son of God, of all people, cries out questioning whether God had forsaken him?

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been following the trail of suffering that Jesus traveled in the last hours before his death. We have reached the end of this trail today. Leaders, some described as religious and some as political, dealt with Jesus unjustly, inhumanely. These particular people, more in love with their own power than with God's truth, reject the person God had sent, the one who was God in their midst. However, it was not just the power-brokers who reject Jesus. When things start going badly, Jesus' own disciples turn away from him too. He had predicted they would desert him and he was right. A heartbreaking part of the story of the cross is that humanity as a whole rejected the God who came into our midst. As I have said repeatedly in this sermon series, never should we cast blame on a particular group for the rejection and death of our Lord, and never should we in the name of our Lord treat any person or group less than with love.

But there is another part of understanding the story of Jesus' death. Nobel winning poet Octavio Paz writes, "Tell me how you die and I will tell you who you are."<sup>1</sup> With it being a crucifixion, we understand Jesus' death was agonizing. But the Gospel of Matthew draws no explicit attention to the blood and the physical pain. Those are not the point. The different gospel accounts include several different statements that Jesus said from the cross, but Matthew focuses on just one – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If we leave it at that, we could easily conclude that Jesus did not die as he lived.

And yet, we recognize what he says as the first line from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm. We frankly would have been more comfortable if he had quoted the first line of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd,” or the 24<sup>th</sup> Psalm, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” Perhaps there is something within us that sort of wishes the story had ended with the triumphant Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. But the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm is what matches Jesus’ experience as he is dying. That psalm recounts someone who has been rejected, who is suffering greatly. It helps to define Jesus’ experience for us. He doesn’t just say the first line of the psalm – Matthew tells us he cries out with it. There is intensity in the words. Did Jesus feel forsaken? It is hard to imagine that he could he have felt otherwise. And yet, even at this most difficult and pain-filled moment, he refers to God as “My God” in his native Aramaic language. He is dying the most cursed death, but Jesus does not curse God as he dies. He is praying to God. He is pouring out his broken heart to God.

Here, Matthew’s account offers us a saving permission, even encouragement to share our most honest and challenging thoughts and feelings with God. Neither Jesus’ prayer, nor our own prayers need to be edited and cleaned up. Sometimes we need to express our dismay, our bewilderment, our lack of understanding, our grief about the pain and brokenness we and our world are experiencing. And this story in particular helps us realize that the God who understands such human needs saves us from utter despair. As we express what is in our hearts honestly, openly to our God, we can move toward the hope with which God enables us to live and die.

Although this psalm and Jesus’ prayer from the cross begins with someone who feels godforsaken, it doesn’t end there. While it starts with heart-wrenching lament, it ends with words of assurance that God has heard his cries. It proclaims that dominion did not belong to those who abused their power or to those who deserted someone in need; it belongs to the Lord. That is who rules over the nations. The psalm affirms that those who have lived for the Lord shall still worship the Lord even in death. The prayer that is Psalm 22 ends with the following words filled to overflowing with hope: “future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

Jesus dies as he lived, lovingly showing the way to relate honestly with God. Rejected by all around him, as he faces death, he turns to his God, to our God and

finds hope, not only for himself, but even for future generations. What he sees, what he hears, particularly what he feels, give him no reason to have hope. But in God, that hope cannot be killed. The reality of human suffering is met by a greater reality – the conquest of a suffering that leads to despair by the God of suffering love. By power alone, God could only eliminate suffering by eliminating human freedom. Yet here we come to understand that even as we reject the God in our midst, that God takes on our suffering. And more than that - this story from God does not end with Jesus' death. Right after it is announced that Jesus has died, we hear this: "And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."

The innermost part of the temple, the Holy of Holies, separated by a curtain from where people could come in prayer, understood to be the place where God's presence was most powerful, was no longer to be kept separate from them. It was earthshaking that even those in the most unholy of situations were now welcome into God's holy presence. In other parts of scripture, we hear more of interpretations of the meaning of the cross that have to do with God's forgiveness. These are important. But here in Matthew, the grace at the cross goes beyond that, to the presence of God with us, Immanuel, which reaches a whole new level. It leads to a new saving beginning. In spite of what it appears, Jesus has not traveled the way of suffering alone, and any point when we feel forsaken by God, we have reason to believe that God is still with us. We can offer our anguished honest heartfelt prayers and can wait with confidence to have our hearts lovingly transformed. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, described his understanding of God as the unmoved mover.<sup>2</sup> But here we see God as the most moved mover. Even when we feel godforsaken, nothing could be further from the truth. Hoshiana! Save us! My God, my God, there is hope with your abiding presence, your loving presence, even in the heartbreaking tragedy of a dreadfully dark Friday afternoon. And soon, God will bless us in a saving way with even more hope at the dawn of a Sunday morning called Easter. Thanks be to our God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, Grove Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristotle/The-unmoved-mover>