

WHO IS THIS? HOSANNA!

Yay God! Hallelujah! Every year we as Christians have a parade, not on Main Street, not even on Colton Ave, but right here in church! Those of us who have come to church for many years or all of their lives recognize the story of the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It's kind of like watching a Christmas pageant and hearing the story of Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and the donkey. And here we are today hearing about another donkey, right? Well, for those of us who have never heard this story, or have never come to church, this is a very strange thing to do in worship. And for those of you who can't imagine there are people in our country who have never heard of Palm Sunday or the story, let me just say that there are more of

them then there are of us today. So when people come to church today and see the processional with the palm branches and hear this story...what in the world does it mean? Why do Christians re-enact this ancient parade every year? Just what is Palm Sunday and what does it have to do with being a disciple of Jesus?

Well, there are many scholars who say that the palm branches and the shouts goes back a century-and-a-half to the triumph of the Maccabees and the overthrow of the brutal Antiochus Epiphanes, who was the king appointed to Israel by Alexander the Great after he conquered much of the known world . "In 167 B.C. Antiochus had caused a full-scale Jewish revolt when, having already forbidden the practice of the Jewish religion on pain of death, he set up,

right smack in the middle of the Jewish temple, an altar to Zeus and sacrificed a pig on it. It's hard to imagine a greater slap in the religious face to good Jews. Stinging from this outrage, an old priest named Matthias rounded up his five sons, all the weapons he could find, and a guerrilla war was launched. Old Matthias soon died, but his son Judas, called Maccabeus (which means "hammer"), kept on and within three years was able to cleanse and to rededicate the desecrated temple. "Mission Accomplished?" Well, it would be a full 20 years more of fighting, after Judas and a successor brother, Jonathan, had died in battle, that a third brother, Simon, took over, and through his diplomacy achieved Judean independence. After winning independence, Israel had a century of Jewish sovereignty.

Of course, on this Jewish Independence Day, there was a great celebration. "On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered Jerusalem with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because the great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel."

So says the account in I Maccabees - a story as well known to the crowd in Jerusalem that day as George Washington and the defeat of the British is known to us." David E. Leininger, *A World in*

Turmoil

To continue the ancient story, some people tell it that Pilate, the Roman governor appointed by the Emperor of Rome to rule over Israel comes into Jerusalem riding a white Arabian warhorse bedecked with golden armor and flowing

with purple cloth, followed by thousands of the Roman Legion. This was an incredible show of power and parade of the indestructible hold of Rome over the Jews in their own city.

Of course, you realize that all of this smacks of Antiochus Epiphanes who ruled Israel with an iron fist not more than two hundred years before this scene. It's kind of like having the British redcoats marching through Washington D.C. once again as victorious invaders. The air is thick with revolution and anger toward Pilate and his blatant show of power.

Now we get to the gospel reading this morning, where the great prophet, healer, teacher, Jesus of Nazareth comes down from the Mount of Olives on the other side of the

Kidron Valley riding not a warhorse, but a donkey. His disciples who number in the hundreds begin to shout as they walk down the mountain, into the valley and up the hill of Zion where Jerusalem sits, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna to the Son of David!"

As I was reading Matthew this year, I keyed on the word "Hosanna" because I didn't really know what it meant in Hebrew, so I looked it up in the Jewish encyclopedia. Hosanna is the Greek word for Hoshana in Aramaic and Hebrew and it means, "Save, I pray" or "Help, I pray". Well, this got me really interested in the word, because it changes the meaning and mood of the gospel reading today. The

people were not saying "Yay, God" they were saying, "Help us, save us I pray you Jesus".

So I dug a little further and discovered that Hoshana refers to Hoshana Rabbah, which is on the seventh day of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, 21st day of Tishrei, and final day of Rosh Hashana. What all that means is that during Rosh Hashana, Jews confess their sins before God, and on the seventh and last day, there is a special worship service called Hoshana Rabbah where the people can still alter the verdict and judgment of God upon the world for the entire year before Yom Kippur, which is the New Year. The modern day observance of the rituals of Hoshana Rabbah

are reminiscent of the practices that existed in the times of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The priests used to carry the palm branches, willow branches, myrtle branches, and fruit of a citron tree in their hands and seven times, they would march around the altar of God, now it is done by the people and the Rabbi. The entire ceremony is to demonstrate rejoicing and gratitude for a blessed and fruitful year. Moreover, it serves to tear down the iron wall that separates us from our Father in Heaven, as the wall of Jericho was encompassed "and the wall fell down flat" (Joshua 6). Each "hoshana" is done in honor of a patriarch. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David. The end of the service is a prayer for the speedy arrival of the Messiah.

So this is very interesting to our gospel reading this morning because Matthew says that the people cut down branches from trees, and maybe they were palm, willow, and myrtle, and laid them on the road as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The disciples sing and recite the Hoshana and praise verses to God, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." My point is that this is Passover, not Rosh Hashana. Yom Kippur already taken place months ago, the judgment of God is sealed against them and the world for the year. I believe that Matthew is saying in his gospel is that Jesus is worthy to open the seals of judgment upon Israel and the world, and God will judge Israel and the world again through the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

Of course, this would bring chaos to the religious leaders of Jesus' day, and indeed Matthew says that Jerusalem was in turmoil...as if an earthquake shook up the place.

So the cry "Hosanna" "Save us, Lord I pray" brings a completely new meaning to the procession and parade we come to expect this time of year. The theological meaning for Matthew and for us is that Jesus is the one who saves us from our sin. Jesus is the one who tears down the dividing wall between humanity and our Father in heaven and gives us a new relationship with God. Jesus is the one who gives us freedom, not the wrath of God that gives us freedom to destroy ourselves, but true freedom in the love of God and love of neighbor as ourselves. Jesus is the one who rescues us from the insanity of doing the same thing over and over

every day and expecting different results. Jesus is the one who gives a fruitful year, not in terms of agriculture but in spiritual terms where we grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ and learn to trust God more and more.

All of this comes from the word "Hosanna" and the deep meaning it represents to the Jewish people. They needed to be saved, not just from the oppression of Pilate and the Romans, or from abject poverty that 99% of the population was subjected to, or from the emotional state of being and occupied people, but also they needed to be saved from sin.

As we have explored Paul's letter to the Romans this entire Lenten season, this word "Hosanna" has special meaning for us. We learned the definition of sin, which is separation from God. The root of sin is idolatry. We all are

stuck in sin, and we have no hope of ever getting out, we always find some way of moving further away from God by worshiping the idols we make for ourselves. The biggest and most subtle idol is "I" or "me", what I want, what I need, what I deserve. This idol permeates everything we say, everything we do, and it continues to suck us back into sin and living apart from God.

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Save us, we pray, help us out of this pit that we've dug and fallen into over and over, Jesus!" Of course, the gospel writers wrote this, for they know that it is only Jesus who can save us, it is Jesus who demonstrated true obedience to God and was free from sin, it is Jesus who took sin upon the cross and killed it, so that

now we have a choice: to live with God or live apart from God in sin again.

That's what Holy Week is all about, that's why it is so important that you come every night this week for worship and be reminded what Jesus did for us. It is so fitting that we begin Holy Week today with "Hosanna" because today we need to dig deep into our heart and discover what we need to be saved from, what idols have we hidden away in our lives that we think God doesn't see... is there something that is just crushing us that we need to be delivered from...something that only God can save you from whether that's fear, or worry, or mistrust, or hopelessness, what is it that God can step in and lift from you so that you can finally trust God this week? Let's go to God in prayer on this first

day of Holy Week, to lift up our Hosannas, our cries for help, and witness the power of God who saves us.