

Text: Matthew 21:1-11

Title: Hosanna Prayers

Date: 5 April 2020, Palm Sunday

For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON

Preacher: Rev. Amanda C. Bakale

### **It's incredible how quickly what's normal becomes strange to us.**

Even in the little things. While watching a show on Netflix or catching a commercial during the news I'm taken aback by seeing crowds of people. Seeing people next to each other. On a busy street. In a crowded city bus. At a dinner party in someone's home. Normal everyday activities. Until recently. And now it all looks strange to me.

### **And it's incredible how quickly what once was strange to us becomes a new kind of normal.**

Staying home. No friends or family coming over. No-one just dropping by to say 'hi'. Walking 2 meters apart from everyone we see. On sidewalks. In parks. Standing in line at the grocery store with plexiglass dividers and tape marks on the floor. Sitting down to the sewing machine to make face masks.

And this. Right here. Doing church like this. Speaking to a camera in my home office rather than being with you all in one place.

### **How quickly what's normal becomes strange. And what's strange becomes normal.**

This goes for how we're approaching Holy Week this year. In this time of COVID-19. All that has been a part of our normal worship life in previous years has become strange to us.

On Friday, we will not gather together to hear the story of the cross and pass the bread and cup to one another. Instead we'll worship as the body of Christ a part from one another in our homes. Gathering around our kitchen tables rather than the communion table to take, eat, remember, and believe.

And Easter morning will come with no trumpets. No big extended family dinners. No joining our voices with the whole congregation as we sing of Jesus' resurrection. And my heart aches for that. Not just as a pastor. But as a worshipper, too.

This Holy Week has become strange. Right at the moment when we all really need a good dose of normal. Of familiar rituals. And hymns. And just to sit in a pew and be next to someone. To pass the peace. To see one another. To give each other hugs.

**And I found this week as I sat with this very familiar passage of Scripture, that it became strange to me too.**

It is such a familiar story to most of us. Jesus on a donkey. Riding into Jerusalem. Amid shouts of “Hosanna!” and waving palm branches. It’s a story we hear every year on this last Sunday of Lent.

In previous years, I have always been drawn to the joy of the crowd. To the exuberance. The spontaneous excitement and energy of a flash mob surrounding Jesus as he enters the city.

But not this year. Not this week. Like watching a crowded scene in a movie, I just can’t quite take the crowd. It’s a little too much. It’s all a little too strange these days. A little too outside my new disorienting normal.

**So this week, as I sat with this passage of Scripture, I have been trying to keep my focus on Jesus.**

On keeping my attention on Jesus, to stay with him, in the midst of the distracting crowd. To see what word there may be for us in this new strange normal we find ourselves in.

As I kept my eyes on Jesus, the first thing I noticed is how intentional he is here.

We typically just dive right into Jesus seated on his donkey in the midst of waving palm fronds. But as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, comes to a town on the outskirts, he sends two of his disciples into the village to arrange his transportation into the big city. Not a wagon. Not a horse. A pair of donkeys. A mother and her colt. An odd choice under the circumstances. And it’s not that his disciples couldn’t find anything else for Jesus to ride in on. Jesus specifically asks for them. In fact, we get a little glimpse of Jesus’ divine nature peeking out here.

If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.

Kinda like a Jedi mind trick. But instead of “These are not the droids you’re looking for”, we get a “The Lord needs your donkeys.” And the disciples come back to Jesus with the donkeys he needs.

And Matthew gives us the reason why Jesus needs them. Matthew draws our attention to the prophet Zechariah speaking about the kind of king God has promised for his people:

Say to Daughter Zion,  
'See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

Except it's not just Matthew making this connection. Jesus does too. Jesus seeks out this particular mode of transportation when he was perfectly capable of walking into the city on his own two feet surrounded by a crowd.

Jesus chooses this kind of entrance.  
Jesus chooses to enter Jerusalem like old Zechariah said.

And having orchestrated his entrance, Jesus climbs onto the donkey and enters Jerusalem with a swarming crowd of people around him.

And the crowd shouts and chants as the donkey carries Jesus deeper into the city, deeper into the crowd:

Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Snippets of Psalm 118. A passover psalm. Some religious short hand that pilgrims say to one another during this religious festival. Kinda like a pious way of saying "Hooray!"

The crowd didn't really get it, obviously. What they were saying. 'Cause when folks start asking about the guy on the donkey they are all cheering for, the crowd identifies him as "Jesus, you know the prophet...the one from Nazareth in Galilee." Not as the promised Messiah. Not the Son of God. Just Jesus, the prophet from Galilee.

**But how did Jesus hear the cries of the crowd?**

“Hosanna” is a prayer. A plea. Literally meaning “Save, please!” When the crowd shouted and sang “Hosanna!”, Jesus heard what they were truly saying:

Save! Save us, please!

In the crowd’s shouts of “hosanna!”, Jesus hears the prayers of God’s people. Their deepest needs. Even if they didn’t know it themselves.

**Hosanna has become a pious kind of religious exclamation for us, too.**

One that we rarely say on any day not Palm Sunday or Easter morning. Hosanna! It’s almost meaningless to us, to be honest. And we can shout it and sing it and be just as clueless as the crowd clustered around Jesus.

But I wonder if now, if in this Holy Week in the shadow of a pandemic, if our hosannas sound a little different...

In this strange new normal we live in, we’re waking up to just how much we take for granted in our normal lives...

The presence of others.

Our own health.

Going to school.

The ability to gather with friends, family, church.

Playing with the other kids in our neighbourhood.

Going out to dinner with friends.

Financial security.

Employment.

A risk-free trip to the grocery store.

Or just a worry-free walk in the park.

And in this strange new normal we live in, maybe our hosannas are closer to the original meaning of the word. Maybe our hosannas are closer to prayers and pleas than our normal shouts and exclamations ever brought us before....

When we are separated from those we love by distance and disease, Hosanna. Save us.

When we get the call from work that we've been let go, Hosanna. Save us.  
When we get anxious and don't know what to do with ourselves, Hosanna. Save us.  
When we're overwhelmed by all that we see and can't control, Hosanna. Save us.  
When we're exhausted by keeping everything "normal", Hosanna. Save us.

We're no longer singing and shouting with a crowd, clueless to the words we say.

**We're praying out of our deepest need, to the One who can hear us, the only One who can save us.**

Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem just like old Zechariah described. On a pair of donkeys. With gentleness. With purpose.

Jesus entered the city he would die in knowing what was ahead,  
knowing what awaited him,  
knowing what was needed of him,  
knowing what it would take to answer the prayers of God's people, to answer our cries of hosanna.  
And still he entered the city.  
For us.

Because "great is his love toward us" and "the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever" (Psalm 117).

There was some talk in some Christian circles of postponing Easter. Of holding off on Holy Week until things are back to "normal". But that presumes that what we're celebrating this week is about what we do or don't do.

But the truth of this week, the promise of what we remember and believe this week is that God has answered the prayers of his people. He has heard the hosannas and has come to save. No matter the cost.

Say to Daughter Zion,  
'See! Your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey'

And what was true on that day in Jerusalem is true for us now.

**Your King comes to you.**

Whether you are shouting your hosannas with joy or can only manage to whisper them right now.

**Your King comes to you.**

The crowd shouted portions of Psalm 118, but here is the end of that psalm, a word of promise and a word of joy in the midst of this strange new normal, a word of hope as we walk through Holy Week this year:

Hosanna! Save us!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

From the house of the Lord we bless you.

The Lord is God,

and he has made his light shine on us.

With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession

up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will praise you.

You are my God, and I will exalt you.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

he love endures forever.

**Amen.**