

Long, long ago, God offered salvation to God's people – God gave enslaved Hebrews space, separation, and liberation from bondage; after four hundred years of slavery, Pharaoh finally let Joseph's people go. In a new space, across a wide river, with an open future, Israel became a defined nation, a promised land. The Exodus, God's most tangible and remarkable act of salvation, would be expressed in the liturgy and worship of Israel for generations to follow. As a matter of fact, it still is today.

In the Second Temple period, devout Jewish people were required to visit the Temple in Jerusalem for three main festivals, one of which was the Passover, an acknowledgement of God's role in the Exodus. As a result, Jerusalem, a city of perhaps 40-50 thousand residents, swelled to hundreds of thousands of people each festival season, as pilgrims flooded the city.

In today's text, Jesus, and his disciples, and the crowds that follow, are among these pilgrims.

One thing, which I think is often lost to us today, is just how provocative this festival must have been. In the time of Jesus, Israel had been a captive state, in some form or another, for more than half a millennia: first the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, and now the Romans. And while none of these nations had a Pharaoh, they certainly had monarchs that deemed themselves *Lord of all*.

Yet here were faithful people. Even though they were still under the thumb of oppression; even though Pilate and his goons surrounded them; two-hundred-thousand people dared to tell the tale: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one," *and this God, the God of*

*the Exodus, the God of David, the God of all generations, will be with us, will save us, will liberate us, will set us free, will restore Israel to her proper place. What God has done, God will do again!*

What a beautiful image of protest, of hope, of faith! This very image has born itself out in the generations to follow, most prominently in our country, first in protesting the institution of slavery, and more recently in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

But here's what's even more provocative to me this morning.

The crowds were chanting, "Hosanna," which loosely translated means, "Save us," or "Save us, now!" And you know the rest of the chorus, don't you? "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

In a scene of provocative protest, a smaller group proclaims an even more provocative protest! It's not just that the time for redemption is coming, be it soon, or even one day in the future, it's that the time for Israel's redemption has arrived right now. Jesus, this outsider, this Galilean peasant, has been proclaimed Messiah by the crowds.

*Save us, we're ready, they say. You are the one we've been waiting for. You are anointed. You are destined. You are of God. Come on now, Heaven, back us up, testify to this; Can I get a witness, please!!!*

Here's the deal: it's one thing to speak about *someday* to those in authority. It's quite another thing entirely to tell the powers-that-be that *someday* is actually today. They don't tend to like that very much.

You all know how the story unfolds. Jesus is bad for business. The Romans don't want any trouble. The Temple Establishment will not have the people dictate the terms of Messiahship – that's for learned clergy to decide. And the people, even though they recognize the saving power of Jesus, will be too impatient – you can keep your spiritual renewal; it's the political, social, military, and economic renewal we're after.

Jesus intends to save us from the systems – systems that monetize life; systems that jeopardize the well-being of the many to ensure the power of the few; systems that are finite, and fleeting, and flimsy when stressed; systems that focus on what's not God, instead of what is God.

But we are stubborn. We don't want to be saved from systems. We just want the systems to work better for us. Now. We want to ensure we have enough. And we want to ensure that our *enough* is more than our neighbor's, and significantly more than our enemy's.

The jubilee of Sunday, high on that mountain, Messiah in our presence, gives way to the impatience, fear, greed, and loneliness of the weekdays in the valley. Peace. Love. Faith. Humility. Patience. Servanthood. Obedience. Righteousness. Selflessness. Neighborliness. All of these traits are SO inefficient. It takes so long to generate inertia. We'll just stick to sheer force, thank you very much.

And before we know it, the loud hosannas have been muted. The chants are gone. And all that remains are a few faithful souls, still believing their words, however lonely, however meager, can sway the crowd.

If I am honest with you, in most years, maybe even in every year up to this point in my life, Palm Sunday, and the Holy Week events that follow have been more of an intellectual exercise than a spiritual one.

It's not that I lack faith in our Creator, nor in the ability of one life, to be lived so fully, that it can transform our very being, that it can reveal the identity and character of God. I faith such a thing. I really do.

It's not that I don't believe in the potential of each one of us to live as wholly and as fully as Jesus did. It's not that I don't believe in God's power to resurrect, to renew, to restore, to redeem life where life appears lifeless. I believe all of this. To my core, with all of my heart, with all of my being.

But up until this year, up until the last few weeks, really, I've never been given a legitimate reason to lack faith. By all accounts, my life has been charmed. And I have never been in a situation where the only thing I could grasp was my faith. I realize what a privileged confession this is, and for those who have had much different experiences, I pray that God would give me empathy, compassion, and understanding for the trials you have faced or are facing, and that God would offer you healing and comfort.

I say all of this, because, usually, when I think about Palm Sunday, and all of those pilgrims, I have to imagine their desperation and their anxiety, because I'm not usually feeling desperate, and I'm not usually feeling anxious.

But this year, I'm a pilgrim, and a virtual one at that!

And there's a virus. It's got all of us stumped.

It's rendered defenseless the systems that have long given us a sense of security. It's exposed the flawed nature of our economy. God created a world that was supposed to have a mini-jubilee every seven years – the provisions of the last six years, would offer more than enough, to everyone, for the seventh year. And there was to be a grand jubilee, every fiftieth year, to recalibrate the land, in order that all might thrive. Our world has hit the pause button for less than a month, and chaos has ensued. Our fields are not rested; our fields are exhausted.

We have the smartest minds, the most talented people, the most dedicated workers, and for the most part, very competent leaders, all of them beginning to cooperate in tandem to address a universal crisis: how do we protect ourselves from an invisible virus? And each and every day, we are still shocked – Because how can, we, the most advanced people in the history of the planet, still be flummoxed by the intricacies of life? I mean, really, how complicated can creation be?!?

Let me say that I do believe in science. And I do believe in reason. And I do believe in pragmatism. I believe God has given us all of these things, in spades, and that these gifts have, are, and will continue to be used to sew God's good purposes. All of these things will be vital in helping to create a lasting resolution to our current crisis.

But this week, more than ever, I see the earthy systems, of which I am very much a part, seeking to control that which systems cannot ultimately control: life and death.

And on this Palm Sunday morning, I hear myself singing, shouting, hoping, and praying with every fiber of my being: “Hosanna!!! Save us, save us, save us, now, O God!”

I hear the tumult of the bands; I feel the breeze of a thousand palm branches waving around me; I am buoyed by the witness of millions of saints who have declared their own stories of salvation and liberation, all by the hands of the Lord we presume to follow.

And high upon this Mount of Olives, I am confident, I am defiant, I am spirit-filled: “Hey Rome, God’s about to straighten things out, right now.”

And I’m praying that I can hang on to that feeling tomorrow, and in the days to come.

‘Cause when I start my descent into the valley, the voices of the systems get a little louder. I still want my revolution and my resolution. But I find myself adding conditions and excuses. I want God to resolve this crisis, to resurrect and re-birth this world, and when God does, I want to make sure the system still works for me. I wonder if I’m letting my political leanings dilute my love of neighbor? I wonder if I’m okay with other families scraping by as long as mine remains well-off? I wonder if I want God’s transformation to happen, only without changing me, without my having to give anything up, without my having to experience a world that operates, for me at least, fundamentally different than the one my privilege affords me now? I wonder if all I hope for in this coming resurrection is simply a return to the fall of 2019, where Impeachment proceedings, and football games, and light bills held a gravitas that now seems incomprehensible?

Most of all, I wonder if I just want to be right rather than righteous? I wonder if I'll only accept a resurrection I can explain, and comprehend, and control? And I wonder, will I have the strength to hear those voices of dissent, those loud islands of hosanna-cries, when the systems once more win over the masses?

This is weighty stuff, y'all!!! But I look out, and I see a grid (thanks Zoom!) of faithful people, who gather every Sunday, and other intervals in between, to collectively offer a provocative claim: We believe in the Lordship of Christ, God's everlasting yea, over and against the Lordship of pharaohs, be they in ancient Egypt or modern-day Charlotte, with their tired and finite no's. We believe that God is present. We believe that God is working. We believe that God will save us.

Friends, when we walk down that hill tomorrow, the voices of faithful people may not be as loud as today, but they will be no less true. God is gonna reckon with Corona. God's spirit is gonna swirl into leaders who will act with God's grace and God's purpose, and leaders who will most likely receive the full brunt of disapproval from the world's systems. But a renewal of life is coming, this generation's great Exodus story is in the works, no matter what the speakers at the press conference tell you, no matter what the talking heads insist.

So be a pilgrim. Join that hosanna chorus. Put faith in the One who is not finite. Put faith in the One who will keep us. Put faith in the One who creates the Sundays of our lives.

Hosanna, God. Save us. Save us. Save us.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.