



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
2 April 2023
“Hosanna”
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Matthew 21:1-11

Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

21:1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

21:2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

21:3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

21:4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

21:5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

21:6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

21:7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

21:8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

21:9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

21:10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

21:11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

I must have been asleep the day in seminary when they covered the meaning of "Hosanna." Does anyone here know it's literal meaning?: "Save us" or "Save now!"

Scholars debate what the crowds meant when they quoted Psalm 118 upon Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the Gospel of Matthew: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" they say.

Some interpret it less as a cry for help and more as a way of paying homage, a way of honoring this carpenter turned messianic figure.¹ This interpretation rings true for many of the musical theater nerds in the room such as myself, because that was how Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice interpreted it in their great 1970s rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*:

Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna sanna ho
 Sanna hey, sanna hosanna
 Hey JC, JC, won't you smile at me?
 Sanna ho, sanna hey, Superstar

¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 294.

Others take the “Save us” of Hosanna literally.² Again, these lines draw from Psalm 118. Earlier in that same chapter, the Psalmist cries aloud, desperately, for God’s help:

All nations surrounded me;
 They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
 They surrounded me like bees;
 They blazed like a fire of thorns.
 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!³

Also, earlier in chapter as Matthew recounts Jesus’s entry to Jerusalem, the Gospel writer quotes from the messianic hopes of the prophet Zechariah. When Jesus rides in on a donkey and a colt, Matthew reminds his readers, “This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet.” The full quote from Zachariah reads as if it were an answer to a people’s plea for help:

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
 Lo, your king comes to you;
 Triumphant and victorious is he,
 Humble and riding on a donkey,
 On a colt, the foal of a donkey (9:9).

So, I tend to agree with those who read the Hosannas of the crowd literally, ‘Save us, Son of David.’ Matthew is drawing on a Jewish scriptural tradition of the people crying out to God in order to explain what is happening when Jesus rides into Jerusalem.

Such Hosannas ring especially true when you remember who the crowd is crying out to:

² W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 252.

³ For cohesion, I’ve selected relevant verses here from Ps. 118.:10-25

- The one who, just a few verses earlier, proclaimed that in the kingdom of God, everyone receives a life-sustaining wage, no matter when or from where they started their work (20:1-16).
- The one who said, just a few chapters later on the streets of Jerusalem, that the kingdom of God appears when we share our food with those left hungry, when we care for those who are sick, when we visit those imprisoned, for “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me” (25:40).
- In this kingdom, the shepherd leaves the whole flock to search for the one who has been lost (18:10-14).
- In this kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first (19:30).
- And the Son of Man who ushers it in came not to be served but to serve (20:28).

Is it no wonder then, surrounded by their Roman occupiers, watched over by religious leaders more intent to hold onto power than to care for the community, that the people looked to Jesus, this gentle and humble prophetic figure, proclaiming the coming of God’s peaceful and equitable kingdom, and they shouted Hosanna! Save us! Save us! As Jesus rides through their midst.

At the start of this Holy Week, this Holy Week of 2023, perhaps it is not so difficult for you to imagine joining those in the crowd, crying out, not in triumph or conquest, but with something more like a pleading and desperate cry, ‘Hosanna.’ ‘Hosanna.’ ‘Save us.’

When it seems everywhere we turn, near and far, we see suffering on the one hand and stagnant institutions more consumed with their own survival than the care of the people they serve or represent, on the other. *Hosanna*, the people cried.

We are three months into this year and there have already been 17 school shootings, and 130 mass shootings in this country.

Hosanna, the people cried.

When asked what could be done after Monday's school shooting at the Nashville Covenant School shooting, one Tennessee congressional representative Tim Burchett sounded like so many in our halls of power this week when he told reporters, (and I quote) "We're not gonna fix it—criminals are gonna be criminals. I don't see any real role that we could do other than mess things up, honestly." Asked how he could be so complacent with this status quo when he himself has a school age daughter, Congressman Burchett replied dismissively, "Well, we homeschool her."

Taking Burchett and other lawmakers to task over such nihilistic inaction, New Yorker magazine reporter Jessica Winter reminded readers, that, while gun deaths are the leading cause of death for children and teens in this country, the majority of these cases happen not at school but at home:

Eighty-five per cent of children ages twelve and under who are killed by a gun are shot in their own home [and] Suicide deaths by children and teens, which typically involve a firearm kept in the home, have increased sixty-six per cent in the past decade.⁴

Hosanna, the people cried.

Perhaps Dr. Esau McCaulley, associate professor of New Testament at the Evangelical Wheaton College outside of Chicago, said it best this week when he wrote in the *Times*:

⁴ Jessica Winter, "After the Nashville School Shooting: A Faithless Remedy for Gun Violence," *The New Yorker* March 29, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/after-the-nashville-school-shooting-a-faithless-remedy-for-gun-violence>

There are many ways to judge the success or failure of a country. We can look at its economy, the strength of its military or the quality of its education. We can examine the soundness of our bridges or the smoothness of our highways. But what if we used a different standard? We should judge a nation by a simple metric: the number of weeping parents it allows, the small coffins it tolerates.⁵

Hosanna. Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! The crowds cried hosanna, and Jesus rode through in their midst. Because that is the thing about the kingdom of God. It appears, right in our midst. Right in the middle of times of trouble. Right in the midst of the tragedy, not only far off on the other side of this life, but right here in this life, Jesus appears in our midst. We know, because against all odds, we have seen it.

Around the Covenant School where last Monday's shooting took place, there is a makeshift memorial along the entrance, right up to the point where the road is blocked off. Flowers, teddy bears, and balloons adorn the stacked stone sign. I mention it here, because if you look it up, you can also find countless photos of people praying by the entrance. And people holding each other close, in the immediate aftermath of the atrocity of another school shooting. Because we need reminders that we are not alone or abandoned.

And if you have ever been through downtown Nashville, you know that the highest point in the city that is not a skyscraper is the hill on which the Tennessee state capital building is located. I know, because I used to live right down the street from it.

Last Wednesday, hundreds if not thousands of protestors climbed that hill in mass, with signs that read, "Protect Children, not Guns," "Never again," "Responsible Gun Laws Now," "How Many More?" Because

⁵ Esau McCauley, "How Can We Be a Country that Does This to Our Children," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/28/opinion/how-can-we-be-a-country-that-does-this-to-our-children.html>

they were tired of living in a country with more guns than people; because they wanted to call out a state and a country whose leaders seem more intent at placating a powerful gun lobby than enacting common-sense gun control favored by the vast majority of this country.

There are those on either side of the political aisle who would say that these are opposing visions of the kingdom of God, that we must offer either prayers or political marches. And in one way they are right, because far too often ‘thoughts and prayers’ have been an excuse for inaction. But when they are not abused by complacent leaders, these visions can and must belong together. For Christ is in every prayer said for the grieving, and every shout aimed to wake up stagnant institutions. And sometimes prayers and protests are said in the same breath.

And when they do, the kingdom of God is not some far off thing; it is a present reality.

Every time a community gathers to console each other’s broken hearts. Every time the most vulnerable and excluded are brought in to the center of the community (In just a few verses from our text today, Jesus is condemned by religious hypocrites for dining with tax collectors and sex workers, the most marginal members of his time and place (21:31). Isn’t it a shame that today, how religious leaders use Jesus’s name to exclude and marginalize those most vulnerable in our time and place, like trans communities and BIPOC youth?)

Every time a prayer is said for peace, every time those in crisis find support, every time those pushed to the margins are welcomed first, every time a sword is broken down into a plowshare, the kingdom of God appears among us. And every time it appears, there also is Jesus riding in our midst.

Hosanna. Hosanna Indeed. Amen.