

**The Kingdom And The Cross:  
Save Us!  
Mark 11:1-11  
March 24, 2024  
Palm Sunday**

I admit that I enjoy and use the convenience of digital communication as much as anybody. Text messages, emails, and social media are great ways to share or receive basic information without all the awkwardness that comes from actually talking to a real, live human being. But one of the downsides is that it has tended to flatten out our use of language. When everything is expressed in terms of emojis and abbreviations, we potentially lose some of the richness and depth and nuance of human communication – to say nothing of the fact that sometimes I can't figure out what in the world people are telling me. I feel like I need a decoder ring to read some of my daughter's text messages.

Meanwhile, one of the great things about Scripture is that it expands and elevates our language so that we can more adequately express the realities of God. The Bible gives us words and phrases and images and ways of speaking that are not a part of our everyday conversations – words like glory or hallelujah or holy or majesty or righteousness or iniquity or salvation. (I doubt you have used any of those words in a text message anytime recently.) The

Bible has its own unique way of speaking because it is pointing us to a unique God. This God is not like anything in the created universe, so we have to train our lips to speak of him in ways that are different, ways that capture his transcendence and his majesty and his power.

This morning, we have heard one of the most unique words in all of Scripture. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of Passover, the crowds who line the streets shout “Hosanna!” – a word so unique that it only appears in one other place in the entire Bible. But much like a precious diamond or pure gold, the word’s rarity makes it all the more valuable, because packed into that one word is the essence of the entire gospel message. If we can train our lips, or more importantly, our hearts to speak this word, we will be speaking with and to the heart of God.

As it used in Scripture, the word has two very closely related meanings. At one and the same time, it is a cry for help and a shout of praise. To unpack that, we need to get a little nerdy and have a short grammar lesson. Whenever translators are translating a text from another language into English, they try to find the best, most equivalent word in the English language that will capture the meaning. However, sometimes they come across a word that is so

unique there simply is no English word to fully capture it. When this happens, they will usually decide that instead of translating it, they will simply transliterate it. In other words, they will use the letters in our alphabet to make the sound of the word in the original language and just hope that the meaning or the force of the word will come across.

For example, when translators come across the French word “pain,” they will translate it into English as bread. Pain is the French word for bread. But, when they come across the French word “croissant,” well there simply is no English word to fully capture the flakey, buttery goodness, so they just transliterate it as “croissant,” knowing full well you will know what they are talking about.

A biblical example is the Hebrew word “shalom.” Sometimes, translators will use the English word “peace” in its place, but they know that our English word, “peace,” doesn’t capture the full essence of the Hebrew, so sometimes it just gets transliterated in English as “shalom,” which carries so much more depth.

Well, “Hosanna” is another example. When the translators of our Bible translated the New Testament from the original Greek into English, they couldn’t find an English word that fully captured

what it means, so they left it in its original form and simply transliterated with English letters to make the sound of the Greek word. But when we go to the original Greek to try to figure out what it means, we discover there is another layer, because the authors of the New Testament did the same thing. They used Greek letters to make the sound of a Hebrew word – or, in this case, a Hebrew phrase. That two-word phrase is “hoshiya – na”

The phrase appears only one time in the entire Old Testament – Psalm 118:25. Our English translation reads, “*Lord, save us! Lord, Grant us success!*” In those words, we hear the original, most basic meaning of the word. “Lord, save us!” It is an urgent cry for help. Imagine for a moment that you’ve fallen into the ocean and you can’t swim, or that you are trapped in a burning building. In that situation you wouldn’t be making a polite, subtle request for a little assistance. You would be screaming at the top of your lungs, asking someone to come and rescue you. I know that is a stark image, but it gives us a feel for the emotion behind the word. You are begging for God to help you. Hoshiya – na!

In its most primal sense, the word expresses the deep need of the people who shouted it as Jesus passed them by. Hosanna. Lord, save us! Help us! Rescue us! Now! To understand the force of that word, we have to remind ourselves of the setting. As we

said, Jesus was entering Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week. Passover was the most important of all the Jewish Festivals, because it recalled how God had acted to rescue them from slavery in Egypt and then lead them into their own promised land. In other words, Passover was a celebration of their freedom as God's people. Imagine that our 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Thanksgiving holidays were rolled together into one, week-long celebration.

The emotion behind that celebration was heightened because Israel was not free anymore. They were under the control of Rome, and they desperately wanted to change that. And whenever Passover rolled around, that desire came rushing to the surface. That was at least partly behind the cry that they uttered. Hosanna. Save us, Lord, from the Romans. Save us, Lord, from our oppressors. Save us, Lord, from our enemies. Make us free!

That sets up a conflict, because as we have been discussing as we have journeyed through Mark's gospel, that is not the kind of Messiah Jesus came to be. His mission was not to run the Romans out of town. His mission was greater and more important. His mission was to restore the fellowship between God and his people by atoning for their sins. We will come back to that in a moment, but for now it tells us that the people who lined the streets that day were at least partly mistaken. They were mistaken in that

they misunderstood what their deepest problem was. They believed that the real enemy was out there in the Roman garrisons who controlled them, when in fact, their deepest problem was within their own souls.

But they were absolutely correct in another sense. They knew they needed someone other than them to save them. They knew they needed the kind of rescue they were powerless to provide for themselves. They were up against a power that was bigger than them, and even though they may not have fully understood the nature of that enemy force, they knew they needed someone outside of them to set them free from it. They knew they needed rescue. Hoshiya-na. Save us Lord! Now!

The most important prayer we will ever learn to utter is the cry for help. That's hard. In fact, it's the hardest thing we will ever do, because we cannot ask for help until we are willing to acknowledge we need help. High achievers that we are, we want so badly to think we can manage everything on our own. We can fix the problem, answer the question, solve the mystery, save the relationship, break the habit, wrestle the demon, or defeat the enemy purely by the power of our own will and our own charm. We can be the hero of our own story.

Several years ago, I read a book by Sully Sullenberger. He's the pilot who famously and safely landed that US Air flight on the Hudson River when he lost both engines shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia Airport in New York. In his memoir he recalled his days flying fighter jets in the Air Force. He referenced a study that he read while in the military. The study was about pilots who died in crashes during training. The study revealed that these pilots all chose to wait too long to eject and were at such a low altitude that they hit the ground before their parachutes could deploy. Either that, or they simply went down with their planes. In every case, if they had chosen to eject 30 seconds earlier, they could have likely walked away from the incident with only minor injuries.

Sullenberger concluded that the reason for such action was obvious. These pilots were determined to prove that they could handle the situation and recover the aircraft, even when by every objective standard the plane was unrecoverable. They were up against a problem they couldn't fix, and simply weren't willing to acknowledge it. Goodness knows we certainly are in no position to judge these men for split second decisions they were forced to make in a complication machine moving near the speed of sound, but I wonder if their story might not serve as a good illustration for

how we live. We aren't willing to confess that we need help, that we need saving.

Have you wondered why so many of the stories in Scripture involve people who lived on the margins of society – people who had no money, no power, no influence? Why did God choose a simple shepherd to be king of Israel? Why did God choose a peasant teenager to be the mother of our Lord? Why did Jesus choose working-class fishermen like Peter and James and John to be his disciples? I think it has something to do with the fact that such people have no illusions about their control over life. Their daily experience reminded them that they had no control – that their lives were largely at the mercy of forces bigger than them. Such people are perhaps more ready to acknowledge their need for help.

Meanwhile we, with all our technology and all our wealth, have fooled ourselves into thinking that we can do it on our own, that we can produce the outcome we need. But then, in our quiet moments, when we can't distract ourselves, we know that is not true. One of the reasons we keep our noses buried in our devices all the time is that we don't want to confront the unanswered questions and the unconquerable fears that are closing in on us. We don't want to cry for help. That's why one of the most important things we can do is learn to utter the word "Hosanna!" Save me



Lord. Save me from my fear. Save me from my anxiety. Save me from my pride. Save me from my addiction. Save me from my failure. Most of all, save me from my sin. Save me from everything that has separated me from you because I cannot do it. Hoshiya-na. Save me, Lord.

But there is second layer to the meaning of this word that we also need to embrace. Language is a fluid thing, and over time words take on new layers of meaning. For example, if I were to tell you that something was awful, you would immediately take that as a negative judgment. But if we lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and I told you something was awful, you would take it as a positive, because the word literally means “filled with awe” or “awe inspiring.” (So, if you tell me this was an awful sermon, I can decide how I want to interpret that!). Something similar happened with the word “Hosanna.” In it’s original sense, it means “Save me Lord,” but over time it came to also be a cry of praise that means, essentially, “Salvation has come Lord!” The first sense is what you would shout when you fall in the ocean. The second sense is what you would shout when someone jumps in the water and pulls you to safety. Hosanna! Help has arrived!

That second meaning was clearly on the minds of the people that day as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Their cry of

“Hosanna!” was immediately followed by a cry of blessing: “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*” which, by the way, is also a direct quote from Psalm 118:26. They may not have fully understood who Jesus was or how he was going to accomplish his purpose, but they were confident that God’s messiah would, in fact, save them. They believed God would be faithful to his centuries-old promise to redeem and rescue his people from their enemy. They just didn’t know yet that their real enemy they needed to be rescued from was themselves.

Of course we have an advantage that the people that day did not have. We already know what is going to happen. We know that Jesus is going to go all the way to the cross, where he will lay down his life as atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. He will act to save His people. That is all the more reason why we need to learn to utter that simple but powerful word: Hoshiya-na. Because of Jesus, our deepest need has been met. Our deepest cry has been answered.

As we march toward Easter, I don’t know what your desires and fears are. I do know that we all have them. And I cannot promise that because of what will happen this week all your questions will get answered in exactly the way you want. I cannot promise you that your disease will be immediately healed or that

your bank account will suddenly become flush with cash or that the man or woman of your dreams will show up in your life or that the prodigal child will come back home. I do know that God stands ready to hear our cry for help.

But even more importantly, I know that because of what Christ has accomplished, our relationship with our heavenly Father has been restored. We have been rescued from our deepest enemy, which is the sin that resides deeply within each of us. And because of that, we can be at peace with our God.

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!