

A Holy Lent: Holy Hosanna

Psalm 188:1-2, 19-29 & John 12:12-16

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First Presbyterian, Luling

The first time I took Rachel to the skating rink in College Station, it was pretty busy. It was a Sunday afternoon. It seemed like they were a little understaffed. We were both renting skates, and though they had a good system in place, there was just one person working behind the counter to hand out skates and trade them for a larger or smaller size. There was a long line of people waiting, all anxious to maximize their time on the ice. No one was rude, but the person behind the counter was getting a little harried. He was moving as fast as a person possibly could, as courteously as he could. Really, he was doing a fantastic job. His coworker arrived in the lobby and made eye contact with him. He simply said, "I need help." He didn't have to explain himself or make excuses for why he was asking for help. It was obvious really, even to me, that he needed it. But I was struck by the simple way he asked for it. He didn't add any caveats like, "unless you're busy doing something else" or "when you get a chance." Just "I need help." I was impressed by the way he admitted it so readily. He trusted that his coworker would come to his aid, and she did, not even stopping to put her purse away.

I thought to myself, "That's going to go in a sermon someday." This is the danger of being in my orbit—you're going to end up in a sermon at some point. But this story really says more about me than it does about the ice rink worker. It's really hard for me to ask for help.

You'll remember my short stint as a stablehand a couple of months ago. I recognized a kindred spirit in the horse therapist. It's hard for her to ask for help too. She's a very capable woman, energetic, multi-talented. She'll tell you she's used to "doing it all." But she was sick, and she needed help with the horses. And she asked me. I can't begin to tell you how good it felt to be asked for help, to know that she trusted me not only with the horses, but with herself. She was willing to trust me enough for me to know that she wasn't actually capable of doing it all and needed help. That's the part that's hard for me. Even knowing how good it feels to be trusted and asked for help, it's still hard for me to do it. This ice rink guy stopped me in my tracks. "I need help."

I'll give you the nerdy language background in just a second. But "We need help" is pretty close what the people were saying when they called out "Hosanna!" as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Of all the gospels, John's is the version

that is pared down to its most basic. A bit uncharacteristic of John, but let's take a closer look. The crowd hears that Jesus is coming into Jerusalem, so they take branches of palm trees—John is the only one to specify palm trees—and go out to meet him. They shout “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” Then Jesus finds a donkey and sits on it to fulfill a prophecy in Zechariah. The words of the crowd are also not accidental, or incidental. “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The translators of our Bible, as most English versions, chose not to translate “Hosanna.” John also doesn't explain it, though he sometimes throws in a explanation for Aramaic or Hebrew terminology that his Greek audience might not understand.

Those phrases—hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—may not ring a bell for us, but they certainly did for anyone who was Jewish. And that bell rings from Psalm 118, verses 25 and 26 from what Etta read this morning. That reads, “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

This time, the translators decided to translate the phrase, “Save us, we beseech you!” If you read that phrase in Hebrew, it sounds something like “ho-shee-ah-nah.” Which, despite my terrible Hebrew pronunciation, should remind you of “Hosanna.” Hosanna means something like, “save us we beseech you!” Or “Save us please,” Or “We need help.”

The people on the side of the road, waving their palm branches, were shouting at Jesus “Save us, we beseech you!” in a deliberate echo of this Psalm. We know that because their next words were also identical to the psalm: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

More Hebrew nerdiness. Hebrew words have three letters as their root. The root of hosanna is ya-shah-uh, three letters of a “y” sound, a “sh”, and a “ah” sound that is mostly silent when said by English speakers. The “ho” at the beginning is a prefix, and the “nah” at the end is a suffix that brings the “we beseech you” part of the phrase. So the verb is “to save” and it sounds like “ya-shah.” The noun form of that same root, a word that means “one who saves” is the basis for names with the sound ya-shu-ah, Joshua. And Jesus.

All that nerdiness is to say this. The people knew that they needed to be saved, that they needed help. They were able to ask for help. And they knew the one from whom they were requesting help. They knew he was trustworthy. They knew he was one who could save them, the one who saves. All wrapped up in

“hosanna” were those things. Save us, please, you who are the savior. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We need help.

We usually think of hosanna as a word of praise. That’s how it appears in our hymns and in our liturgies. It’s almost synonymous with hallelujah. It has become a word of praise, because it expresses people’s trust in Jesus, that we trust Jesus to be the one who can save us, who can help us. That’s why we call out to him.

Save us, we beseech you. Hosanna! The worker at the ice rink counter, though I suspect he would never use the phrase “I beseech you,” asked for help in the same way. I need help, please. And I’m asking someone who I trust can help me—in his case, his co-worker.

You already know I preach to myself most every week. But I highly suspect this applies to some of you as well. Asking for help is hard. It’s a challenge. I don’t like to do it. But when we need help, we need help. We turn to humans who we trust, who we know can help us with a particular task.

When the particular task is saving us from whatever internal or external thing is holding us captive, then we need help from the one who saves. We call out with a holy hosanna. Blessed, indeed, is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.