

Sermon for Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020 - "The Sacrifice of Praise"

Palm Sunday - Online Worship
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Matthew 21:1- Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 26:6-13

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Today in one breath, in one word, we have both praised and asked God for help. I've never before focused on how the praise word Hosanna means "save us." It has never felt very relevant, but does it ever now. Save us, O God. Oh, how we need you now.

And yet, the other part of the word Hosanna - the way it is also an expression of praise - is just as important for us today.

It may seem jarring to praise in these times when each morning's news is even harsher than yesterdays. It's also so much harder to praise at home. Oh, how we wish we could be together waving palm branches, parading outside as children race up the sidewalk, singing together "All Glory Laud and Honor".

Praise does not come easily in these days.

The book of Hebrews calls us to offer a "sacrifice of praise." That phrase, a "sacrifice of praise", is an acknowledgement that praise asks something of us, that it costs us something, that it takes some work. That is so true in these days of global pandemic.

And yet dear people of God, the act of praise also saves us. The act of praise saves us from despair, it saves us from the power of fear. It shapes us into people who can hope and sing and trust even in the face of deep sorrow.

Praise is a way of defying the power of suffering. Praise says to suffering - you do not have the last word. There is something deeper and truer. Life and love will ultimately prevail.

The crowds who accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem crying "Hosanna" were defying the power of suffering. They lived under oppressive Roman rule. They lived with no safety net, no health care system, no modern medicine. They lived each day wondering if they would have enough to eat, if they or their loved ones would be beaten, imprisoned or even killed by Rome. They could have been killed for praising someone other than the emperor and yet, they offered a sacrifice of praise to Jesus crying, "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Today we join our voices with them and with the whole communion of saints, the multitude of pilgrims throughout the ages who have chosen to praise in the face of suffering. Sometimes, pilgrims can gather to offer this praise; sometimes, for whatever reason, it is not safe to gather.

Today we also heard the story of an unnamed woman who offered her praise to Jesus in a smaller, more intimate setting. Her story assures us that even when we can't gather with a large crowd, we too can still offer our own sacrifice of praise and adoration. This unnamed woman anointed Jesus' head with costly perfume, a sacrificial act of devotion and love. Jesus' disciples got angry about the waste saying, "This ointment could have been sold for a large sum and the money given to the poor."

That is a common response to praise and worship especially amidst suffering. We wonder if it wouldn't be better to spend our time and energy and resources in other ways to alleviate suffering. Worship seems like a waste. Yet Jesus affirms this woman's sacrifice of praise - the good service she has done in tending to the body of Christ. He says whenever the good news is shared, what she has done is to be told in remembrance of her.

Jesus' affirmation of this woman's act of praise is sometimes misconstrued. His response, "You always have the poor with you," has sometimes been taken to mean that we shouldn't worry about the poor, that we should *just* worship and praise and ignore the needs of the suffering. Yet, Jesus is not saying that at all. He is saying followers of Jesus will always be with the poor, for that is what it means to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus is to be in community with those who are poor and suffering.

And when we are in community with those who know deep suffering, we often discover something powerful about the way the sacrifice of praise saves us. People who have survived disasters, wars, apartheid, genocide, those who live with poverty and hardship - they have much to teach **us** in these difficult days.

In her book, "A Witness", Renee Splichal Larson tells of the night she spent in an open field after barely surviving the Haiti earthquake that killed her husband.

Renee had climbed out of the building that had collapsed around her, the building that was still collapsing, the building that still trapped her beloved Ben. She had nothing but the clothes on her back. It was cold. There were no blankets. There were bodies everywhere, people were dying all around her. The earth was still shaking with powerful aftershocks. Buildings were still crumbling.

The abiding image Renee has from that night is of a Haitian woman who sang praise to God all throughout that night. Amidst the chaos and the fear, the suffering and death, this woman sang unceasing praise, a powerful sacrifice of praise. The times she did need to stop and rest, someone else would pick up the song and sing praise until she could carry on.

As she sang praise, she proclaimed the truth that sustains so many suffering people, the truth that sustained Archbishop Desmond Tutu during apartheid in South Africa - the truth that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.

That image of the Haitian woman singing in the field helps me to understand the story of the unnamed woman anointing Jesus' head. Her singing through the night may have seemed to some like a waste of energy, a waste of breath, a pointless act when so many were in need of medical care and blankets and physical help. Yet, her sacrifice of praise saved many that night, pointing them to a deeper reality than the one unfolding before them. That woman's singing saved and continues to save Renee and her family to this day.

The act of praise is a sacrifice, a sacrifice that also saves us, pointing us to a deeper reality that goodness, love, light and love will prevail.

So today, beloved, let's raise our palms in praise to God. Raising our hands in praise is not something we're used to doing as Lutherans, but let's offer that sacrifice today. I encourage you to raise your palms as we sing our Hymn of the Day and our Sending Song today. After worship take a picture of yourself raising your palms in praise and email it to me or share it with me on Facebook.

And today, let's also offer love and devotion to the body of Christ in a more intimate way by tending to our own hands. Our hands are such important parts of the body of Christ. Our hands are making the love of Christ known even in these times of physical distancing. We are using our hands to call neighbors and loved ones, to write and type messages of hope and support, to stay connected to one another. Many are using their hands to package groceries, to pick up deliveries for others, to tend the sick. We are washing our hands and wearing gloves in order to try to avoid getting sick ourselves, but also in order to flatten the curve of the virus and not overwhelm our health care system. Our hands are getting raw and chapped as we wash them so often.

Today, let's show some love and care for our hands by taking some lotion and anointing our hands with it as the woman anointed Jesus' body with ointment. As you anoint your hands, I will offer you a blessing of love and devotion for your hands and your whole body - the body which is part of the body of Christ on earth.

Blessing the Body

This blessing takes
one look at you
and all it can say is
holy.

Holy hands.

Holy face.

Holy feet.

Holy everything
in between.

Holy even in pain.

Holy even when weary.

In brokenness, holy.

In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.

Holy in distress.

Holy when being born.

Holy when we lay it down
at the hour of our death.

So, friend,

open your eyes

(holy eyes).

For one moment

see what this blessing sees,
this blessing that knows
how you have been formed
and knit together
in wonder and
in love.

Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you:
you who are
temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.

—Jan Richardson

As you raise the palms of your hands today in offering praise, as you wash your hands, as you use your hands to care for others know that your hands are Christ's hands, your body is a temple of God's presence.

Use your hands and your body today to offer a saving, sacrifice of praise. And today may you know deep in your bones the truth that goodness is stronger the evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.