
Broken Hosannas

Mark 11:1-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 29, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

On the surface, this looks like any other Palm Sunday celebration, but Mark makes no mention of palms. There's no waving of palm branches. Mark doesn't play to our expectations. People throw their cloaks on a colt. They spread their cloaks on the road while others just spread cut branches. No mention of palms but from all appearances, this looks like the usual coronation custom of the ancient days (2 Kings 9:13). This could be a hippy-having-Jesus-loving street parade. A royal procession of praise. They shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" They repeat a psalm of praise, the last of the Hallel psalms from Psalm 118:25-26, sung by pilgrims approaching the Temple. It is a royal psalm for the enthronement of a king, a shout to the king or God. 'Hosanna' in the psalm means literally, "save now." Yet it is more than a plea for help in this gospel setting as Jesus approaches Jerusalem; it is full throttle praise and acclamation, at least that what it appears to be. They pump up the 'praise and worship' volume but sometimes sound can be so loud that hearers don't really understand what is going on. On the surface this looks like a scene ancient historian Josephus described of a military leader entering as a triumphant rebel, posing as the new king. In this case, Jesus is being crowned as king and that's how the typical story goes.

But there's more here if we don't allow the noisy sounds to drown out the truth. In fact, the truth can be found in the loud sounds, in the crying out or shouting. "Those who went head [of Jesus] and those who followed were shouting" or crying out, *ekrazon*. Right before this, blind Bartimaeus cried out twice or shouted to Jesus, *ekrazon* (10:47-48). The same word. The irony is that the shouting of 'Hosanna' will later turn to shouting, "Crucify him!" (15:13). Though basically the same word (*ekrazon*), there will be a different cry from the crowd when Jesus is arrested. It won't be the cry of 'Hosanna' but the cry telling Jesus to "go to hell." The cheers quickly turn to jeers like some fanatical soccer fans that turn on their top player just because they lost a game. How quickly praise can make a downward spiral turn. Those who sing your praises now may be the ones who make you sad and mad later. Palm Sunday is the true March Madness.

Things aren't always what they seem on the surface. A priest was invited to attend a house party. Naturally, he was properly dressed and wearing his priest's collar. A little boy kept staring at him the entire evening. Finally, the priest asked the little boy what he was staring at and the little boy pointed to the priest's neck. When the priest finally realized what the boy was pointing at, he asked him, "Do you know why I am wearing that?" The boy nodded his head 'yes,' and replied, "It kills fleas and ticks for up to three months." Things aren't always what they seem on the surface.

When we hear that Jesus and his followers were "near the Mount of Olives" we may not even give it any thought. We may just yawn at a name we heard from Sunday School, just another name in the Holy Land—that's on the surface. But with the procession in conjunction with the mention of the Mount of Olives, one may remember that it is associated with early apocalyptic beliefs of a final battle against the enemies of Israel defending Jerusalem (Zech 14:2-4). The Mount of Olives is linked to messianic hopes of victory and triumph. At the same time, however, it is also a place associated with a city's defeat (2 Samuel 15) so what we have when we hear they are "near the Mount of Olives" is the revelation of a mixed blessing, a "burdensome joy" (James Earl Massey), both triumph and terror, or what Princeton historian Albert Raboteau calls a "sad joyfulness." We should have seen this coming since we've been in Lent for almost 40 days. We should have known where Jesus was heading all along. We do have Palm Sunday every year. We know the story or at least we think we know it. A surface reading will only reveal a

terrific triumph and forget the other cries that are wedded to these cries or all of the other things that have occurred on the Mount of Olives.

Things aren't always what they seem on the surface. In other words, life is not always full of joyous hosannas even on Palm Sunday. Perhaps for a moment or even most of your life, there has been joy unspeakable and full of glory. Last July marked the 75th anniversary of a legendary speech in Yankee Stadium by baseball star Lou Gehrig. Lou Gehrig is one of major league baseball's all-time greats and he played, in my opinion, for the best baseball team, the New York Yankees (Boston Red Sox fans may disagree with me). But here was a man, at the top of his game, known for his long streak of playing the most consecutive games ever—2,130 games. Cal Ripken, Jr. broke his record in 1995. Gehrig was an athlete of athletes who eventually was diagnosed with the nerve disorder known as ALS or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or what is commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

In his iconic "Luckiest Man" speech given in Yankee stadium to fans, he says, "Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn't consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day? Sure, I'm lucky.... When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat, and vice versa, sends you a gift - that's something. When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in white coats remember you with trophies - that's something. When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles with her own daughter - that's something. When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so you can have an education and build your body - it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed - that's the finest I know. So I close in saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for." The disease took his life in about 2 years after this famous speech at the age of 37.

His speech represents to me the sad joyfulness of life, how there are triumphs but also tragedies. In the recent movie, "Still Alice," Dr. Alice Howland is a professor of linguistics at Columbia University, a mother of three children and a wife. She learns that she's suffering from early onset Alzheimer's disease, which she discovers was genetically inherited from her father. The movie shows the story of how the disease gradually impacts her as it progresses along with the various stresses and strains it produces—family relations are tense, she loses her academic position, eventually she can no longer answer questions or struggles with spelling words, she doesn't recognize some family members, her memory declines, and at the end she can barely speak. A professor, a linguistics professor, can no longer form words. Her life could have been lived on the Mount of Olives because it was both triumphant and tragic.

It's like Palm Sunday where we see a parade toward pain. We want to stop Jesus from going where he's going. We want to tell him not to be fooled by the hosannas ringing in his ear because those same people will turn on him. We want to teach him that "all glitter ain't gold." But this parade can't be stopped and nor should we want it to because it is also the victory of our God. We don't just have hosannas but broken hosannas—moments of praise as well as situations of pain and there are times we cannot tell the two apart. There are times when hosannas become other words and experiences. On the surface, we think we know what is happening but then equilibrium becomes disequilibrium and we have no clue how we got there.

We have no idea how what was supposed to be a normal flight from Barcelona, Spain to Düsseldorf, Germany turns into an obliterated airplane in the French Alps. There is as the Psalmist declares, arrows that fly by day and the terror of the night (Psalm 91). Yet there will also be joy in the morning and the joy of a royal procession even during Lent on the eve of Holy Week. Hosannas resound but they will be broken because there are Rachels in our midst "weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more" (Jer 31:15). Life encompasses it all. God encompasses it all.

The procession of Jesus on a colt signals the paradoxical symptoms of the Christian journey. We are joyfully marching toward Christ's death and our death. The Markan scene is very much like the dramatic convention used by Greek tragedian, Sophocles. It is called 'hyporcheme' which "consisted of a joyful scene that involves the chorus and sometimes other characters; takes the form of a dance, procession, or lyrics expressing confidence and happiness; and occurs just before the catastrophic climax of the play. The hyporcheme emphasizes, by way of contrast, the crushing impact of the tragic incident. It is a sudden outburst of joy, more or less ecstatic, not destined to be realized" (Ched Meyers). Hosannas that become "Crucify him!" The drama of joy matches the drama of sorrow to come. The only joy at the foot of the cross may be "the smile of joy" (Bartow) on the faces of those crying out for the death of Jesus. It is ironic. It is comic. It is tragic. The branches for this procession will soon turn to ashes and dust soaked in blood. It is a holy hyporcheme.

...love is not a victory march

It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah (Leonard Cohen)

Christ's love is a broken Hosanna but how will we prepare for it? How will we prepare for what is to come, what is inevitable? For the worst that the world has ever seen? For broken hosannas? I raise the idea of preparation because there is more attention on Jesus' instructions for preparations in this narrative (vv.1-7) than on the entry into Jerusalem itself (vv.8-10). More than half of the eleven verses are about preparation for the entry, for the impending suffering, struggle, and brokenness. Jesus was not afraid of what was to come. He prepares for it and throws a joyous parade. He throws a party when he knows he'll die in a few days. The spiritual life has its ups and downs, its broken hosannas and its sad joyfulness but how do we gird ourselves for this spiritual reality of discipleship?

We listen to and obey Jesus just like his disciples did. We watch what Jesus did and learn from it. We see that Jesus doesn't shrink back from Jerusalem, his place of death. He enters it with courage. He embraces his future brokenness and does so ironically amid shouts of joy. Dying requires preparation and that process may take much longer than the death itself. The means may be where the most spiritual growth will occur, not the end. The spiritual priority may actually be in the preparations.

And as we prepare to face the inevitable broken hosannas, we will surely need Jesus who is God's broken savior and broken bread for the world. We will need to feed on him as food for our journey, taking in his broken body as our own, "carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10), that we may be formed in the spiritual life of broken hosannas.

What better teacher than Jesus. What better Lord than he for his very own name, 'Jesus Christ,' is broken. On one hand, he is the 'Christ' signaling kingship and anointing and messianic hope. On the other hand, 'Jesus' is a crucified first century man who gains the title 'Christ' even though he is no messiah of "ordinary expectation." Our expectations are broken in him. He expands our imaginations and breaks open new realities through his life as "we are reigned over by one who serves us, saved by one who dies, universally embraced by one made to be utterly little"(Gordon Lathrop). To receive his brokenness through communion is to recognize that he is known in the breaking of bread (Luke 24). Recently, a homiletical giant, who was small in stature, retired Emory professor Fred Craddock, died. In one of his later sermons he says, "I once thought wherever Christ is there is no misery, but now I know that wherever there is misery there Christ is." Wherever there is brokenness, there Christ is.

Christ is in the brokenness of creation because he himself is God's broken salvation for the world. He dwells in spaces of joy but he also is revealed in silos of suffering because even when he initially entered Jerusalem he returns to Bethany, which literally means 'the house of affliction.' He left the Temple, the center of civic and religious privilege and power and protection, to return to a space of suffering on his own will only to soon return to the place known as the Skull. Christ knows brokenness but as a pathway toward wholeness and redemption.

There comes a time when the hosannas will not be broken forever because Christ's brokenness breaks the bonds of the world's broken hold on us. He breaks them so that they won't break us forever. He breaks the bonds to redeem the world once and for all, that we may shout forever, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" There will be beauty from ashes (Isaiah 61:3) and wounded salvation from an open grave.