

A Song of Praise, A Cry for Help Palm Sunday 2020, Rev. Rachel Srubas

*Hosanna, loud hosanna
the little children sang;
through pillared court and temple
the lovely anthem rang.
To Jesus, who had blessed them,
close folded to his breast,
the children sang their praises,
the simplest and the best.*

It's a golden oldie Palm Sunday lyric,
written in the 1800s by a woman named Jeanette Thelfall.
You will hear a recording of *Hosanna Loud Hosanna*
after this sermon.
And so you will spare me singing you an acapella solo.

*The little children sang loud hosanna,
The little children sang.*

A commentator on this lyric, named Laura de Jong, suggests that
*If we still need this message today,
it means we have forgotten in part the beautiful story
of Jesus welcoming the children unto him.
Those children were able, more than the adults,
to receive the Kingdom of Heaven like a gift,
with unquestioning joy and gratitude.* De Jong goes on:
*Jeannette Threlfall reminds us of that joy in her hymn, "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna."
She imagines those children running throughout the city,
bursting with excitement and love for Jesus;
simple, undignified, giddy kind of love.
As we raise our own "Hosannas," we are called and invited to do so
with the same exuberance and joy as these children
who praised the One who first loved them.*

I, Rachel Srubas, Pastor of Mountain Shadows Presbyterian Church,
think that's a good reminder for us on this Palm Sunday, 2020 because
we are in a pandemic lockdown and that can feel pretty joyless.
We need all the childlike joy we can muster these days.

I encourage you to do whatever you safely can do
to connect—across social distances—
with the people who make you laugh and lift your heart to the Lord,
the people who think you're funny, or at least funny looking.

Last Sunday evening,
my husband Ken and I connected with his family members
in Indiana, Tennessee, and Georgia by way of a Zoom video call.
It was great to see everybody's face.
It was important to catch up on how folks are coping with working from home.
But best of all, I have to say,
was hearing from Emma and Cora,
the five year-old and 8 year-old members of the extended family.

By way of the camera on the computer,
we got to see the blanket fort that Cora built in the living room.
Then we exchanged riddles, like this:

What do trees and dogs have in common?
They both have lots of bark!

Why didn't Cinderella get picked for the soccer team?
Because she ran away from the ball.

Emma, not to be outdone by Cora asked us,
Why did the chicken cross the road?
We didn't know. So she told us:
To get to the other side!

When you're five years old, that's a new riddle.
And when you're 55 years old, like I am, (or perhaps even older)
it's a good thing to hear it from the mouth of a little kid who thinks it's hilarious.

To Jesus, who had blessed them,
close folded to his breast,
the children sang their praises,
the simplest and the best.

Now, if I were being a grumpy grownup about it that lyric,
I might think Jeanette Threlfall, who wrote it,
had too innocent, or too sentimental a perspective
on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Didn't she realize that when the people shouted *Hosanna*,
as Jesus rode into town on the back of a donkey,
clomping its way over strewn palm branches and cloaks,
they were literally shouting, *We beg you to save us! Please deliver us!*
After all that's what the word *Hosanna* means.

In a few moments we'll get back to what it may have meant
to Jeanette Threlfall, author of the hymn, *Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*.

But for now, let's take a closer look at why
the people throwing their cloaks on the ground in front of Jesus
were shouting *Hosanna! We beg you to save us! Please deliver us!*

Hosanna was a word of acclamation and praise.
But it was also a cry of help, and even a shout of political defiance.
Jesus entered Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish Passover.
Jewish pilgrims had flocked to the city for their annual celebration
of God's liberation of the Israelite people from enslavement.
Jerusalem at the time of Passover was crowded, exciting, and tense.
It was tense because the Roman authorities, the people in political power
did not want a Jewish uprising.

Surely the Romans knew that the Jews shouting *Hosanna*
were looking for national deliverance
in the person of a political liberator, the promised Messiah
who would, they believed, reestablish the Kingdom of the House of David.

When the Roman authorities heard the crowd shouting at Jesus,
Hosanna to the Son of David! they must have known that those words meant,
Jesus, we beg you to save us from the Roman occupiers!
Jesus, deliver us from under the thumb of Rome.
But the salvation Jesus brings
is not a matter of political overthrow by a militaristic Messiah.
If that is what the people want,
they will have to look for someone other than Jesus,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

So says Paul in his great, lyrical hymn to Christ
in the Letter to the Philippians, chapter 2.

Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...

*Hosanna, loud Hosanna, the little children sang,
though they, in their innocence,
knew nothing of Israel’s history of political oppression
and the people’s longing for nationalistic salvation.*

And what did Jeanette Threlfall,
composer of that childlike Palm Sunday lyric know,
about the grave adult concerns
that led suffering people to beg Jesus for deliverance?

It turns out she knew quite a bit about suffering.
Threlfall’s was not a storybook life.
Both of her parents died when she was still a child.
Orphaned, she became, as one writer about her put it,
“the beloved inmate” of various aunts’ and uncles’ homes.
She was frequently ill throughout her life,
and suffered a carriage accident that resulted in the amputation of her leg.
This meant she was often housebound,
much as we are these days,
as we stay home to protect our own health and the health of others.

Jeanette Threlfall’s biographer says,
*Suffering from poor health during the greater part of her life
served to deepen her spiritual faith, and gave her time to write hymns.*

Might you and I follow Threlfall's example
and treat this stay-at-home season in our own lives
as a time of spiritual deepening, especially as we enter into Holy Week
and follow Jesus to the cross?

Now, maybe you need some support for your spiritual life.
If so, I recommend an audio resource that I have found helpful.
It's an application you can download to your phone,
or use on your computer, called Pray As You Go.
But for this season of social distancing, its creators
have provided a sequence of audio devotionals called "Pray As You Stay."
As they say,
*We find ourselves in new and unknown territory as a global family,
bringing confusion and chaos.
Therefore, we hope this prayer guide will help you stay close to God
as you stay where you are.*

Unknown territory, confusion, chaos—
couldn't those words just as well describe Jerusalem
as Jesus entered the city to shouts of Hosanna?
And **Stay close to God**—aren't those words the call and the challenge
of Holy Week?
Even without the beloved Christian custom of singing *hosanna*
and processing into church together;
and even **with** our awareness that the cries of *Hosanna* became cries of *crucify*,
we can—and we must—
enter into this Holy Week filled with hope
because we know, Crucifixion will not have the last word,
and even *Hosanna* will not **be** the last word.
The last word belongs
*to Jesus, who had blessed the children, close folded to his breast,
the children sang their praises, the simplest and the best.*

As we stay where we are, let us nevertheless sing our praises to Jesus.
As we pray as we stay, let us seek throughout this week to stay close to God.
May it be so. Amen.