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"Can You Hear the Children Sing?"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On April 2, 2023, from Matthew 21:1-17

Hosanna is an interesting word. Growing up I always thought it was the same thing as "Alleluia;" an expression that meant "Praise God!" But "Hosanna" is a compound Hebrew phrase that means "Save us, please!" or "Save us, we beg you!" or "Save us now!" And I was disturbed this week to find these words on the lips of children in verse fifteen of our story from the gospel of Matthew. Children were crying out in the Temple, "Hosanna, Son of David. Save us Jesus, we beg you, please Jesus, save us now!" Palm Sunday is for the children, but not simply because they were waving palms with excitement about the arrival of Jesus in the city Jerusalem. It's about the children because they were the one's crying out to Jesus "Save us! Please save us now!" Children were crying out, "Save us!"

I was disturbed to find this in Matthew's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem because the cries of those children sound eerily similar to the cries I heard this week on Thursday when thousands of children in Nashville TN gathered at the state Capitol in response to the Covenant School Shooting to protest gun violence and demand common sense reform. In the hallways between the senate and house chambers, they chanted "Save our children!," and I know they were speaking in English, but to me were shouting "Hosanna!" Children filled the senate gallery and held signs that read "I'm nine years old." Many were removed when they began yelling: "Children are dead!" One lawmaker said, "Our children are out there right now begging for us to do something." Another lawmaker exclaimed to her colleagues, "The children are screaming and shouting out for us to do something about it, and we can do it right now." But no laws were made; no laws were changed.

After the shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde TX, the inaugural poet Amanda Gorman wrote,

"Schools scared to death.
The truth is, one education under desks,
Stooped low from bullets;
That plunge when we ask
Where our children
Shall live
& how
& if



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Gorman goes on to say that for us to watch people kill children again and again and do nothing isn't just insanity—it's inhumanity. "The truth is one nation under guns," she claims, "What might we be if only we tried? What might we become if only we'd listen?"ⁱ Can you hear the children? They are crying, "Hosanna! Save us!"

The chief priests and scribes could hear the children crying for salvation in the Temple and they became angry. So angry, in fact, they challenged Jesus asking him, "Do you hear what these children are saying?" Jesus didn't reply "I'm so sorry you had to hear that. Let me see if I can quiet them down and get them to go home." He shot back, "Yes, I hear the children". Have you never read Psalm 8, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies?" Jesus told the chief priests and scribes, "The cries of these children are a testimony against you. The fact you hear them but won't do anything to help them means their blood is on your hands and you have become enemies of the God who commands us to care for the little ones and the lowly, the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed."

Why were the children of Jerusalem crying out for salvation? It wasn't because they were eagerly anticipating the arrival of a spiritual teacher to save them from sin, or a religious leader to save their souls from eternal damnation, or a new mystical guru to help them find a way to become more holy. Children don't gather in large groups to protest in the halls of power and yell "Save us!" because they want life after death! Children cry out for salvation when they want a chance to live right now, when death is taking their lives, when they're facing premature death, and when they don't have the opportunity to live their lives to the fullest. This is what the children were crying out to be saved from—premature death! They were crying out for chance to live. They were crying out for salvation from a harsh political, economic, and religious system (all wrapped into one oppressive monstrosity) known as the Temple.

In the first church I served a woman came up to me after Palm Sunday service and said, "You've turned our church into a den of robbers." I said, "Excuse me? What are you talking about?" She pointed over to the coffee machine we'd put in the narthex and said, "That is an abomination of God's house." I know this story is ridiculous, but many Christians assume the Temple in Jerusalem was a religious institution and that Jesus came to "cleanse" spiritually of secular things. But that is wildly inaccurate. The Temple was the political, economic, and religious center of all life in Judea. It was the state Capitol, Wall-Street, and the Vatican rolled into one. Money, politics, and religion were intertwined, tangled up, and impossible to distinguish. To protest against any aspect of the Temple was a protest against the whole system, and the Temple was a system of exploitation and death.



Herod's temple was one of the great architectural wonders of the Roman world, yet scholars claim it was an aristocratic system that exploited the vast majority of the population and impoverishing the people of Israel. The people who were in charge of the Temple were wealthy families that were hand-picked by the Romans and called "high priests" or "chief priests." They were not priests in the line of Aaron who were ordained with religious vows or even responsible for presiding over worship. They were aristocrats and administrators appointed to extort taxes, tithes, offerings, and the Roman tribute from peasants and villagers and make high-interest loans to poor families to take further control of their land and labor.

Families were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year to pay taxes, to purchase animals or grain to make sin offerings and guilt offerings as a sacrificial tithe to God, and to pay their tribute to Rome, which most Jews found blasphemous and objectionable. Failure to pay taxes, tithes, offerings, or tributes to the Temple and its authorities was punishable by debt, imprisonment, and death. The average family in those days was barely eking out a living farming in the countryside, which means the Temple was the major cause of debt, poverty, and hunger in first-century Israel. And the people who suffer the most when society is being pushed further and further into poverty, starvation, debt, and death are children. Historians have found the chief priest's ruling class families were expanding their own wealth through the Temple's exploitation of peasants and using the money to build large mansions on the outskirts of Jerusalem, while causing children to starve.

This is why, throughout the gospels Jesus identified the scribes and Pharisees as representatives of the Temple-state who were siphoning off the resource's that people needed to feed their families through the imposition of rigid religious practice, which was making the ruling class richer. The Pharisees got a "kick back" or "finder's fee" for their role in the system and Jesus warned them their support of the Temple was "devouring widows' houses." When Jesus started healing people and forgiving people's sins across the region of Galilee, he wasn't just offering average people grace—he was also saving them money!!! The only way people could be "healed" "cleansed" or "forgiven" was to come to the Temple and pay for it, but Jesus was giving it away for free. As you can imagine that really ticked off the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees because it hurt their bottom line.



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Can we get real about what was going on in the Temple? Can we get real about what Jesus was demonstrating against when he rode into Jerusalem and turned over the table? Jesus had generated a renewal movement in Galilee and gathered a community of people who were in explicit opposition to the Temple-system that was run by the high priestly aristocracy as representatives of the Roman imperial order. That's why all his parables were about money! That's why the rich young ruler walked away. That's why he said it's harder for the rich to enter the kingdom than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. You don't get crucified for being a kind religious leader with a nice spiritual message. You get crucified for turning over the tables, challenging the system, and messing with the bottom line of the powers that be. That's why the charges against Jesus at his trial were that he said he was going to destroy the Temple and forbid people to pay taxes to Caesar.

The climax of the gospel stories is Jesus' aggressive confrontation with the high priests in the Temple, who arrest him, try him in the middle of the night, and hand him over to governor, Pontius Pilate. Jesus was crucified because he marched directly into the center of the Temple, which was backed by the Roman Empire, and confronted its exploitation of the poor and their children. He challenged the aristocracy, criticized the authorities, spoke "speak truth to power," and turned over the tables of the money changers in a powerful protest demonstration of direct action. He didn't march into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to spiritually "cleanse" the Temple and he wasn't crucified to "fulfill scripture" or to "appease the wrath of an angry God." He marched into Jerusalem and subjected himself to death on a cross to save people from an unjust system that was making a few people rich while subjecting everybody else to extreme poverty, hunger, disease, humiliation, oppression, and death. Jesus subjected himself to premature death to protest a system that subjected poor people to premature death. He lived and worked in such deep solidarity with the people the Empire was already crucifying that they had no choice but to put him to death.

Dr. King once said, "A person does not truly begin to live until they discover something that they are willing to die for." Jesus was willing to die for the poor, sick, marginalized, oppressed, the crucified people of the Earth, and especially for the children who were crying out "Save us!" And he told his followers to take up their cross and follow me. As Bonhoeffer famously said, "When Jesus calls a person, he bids them to come and die." Jesus said, "Come follow me and die so that others might live.



Come follow me and sacrifice your life so that others might be saved from premature death.” This is the heart of the gospel, but it is also the most difficult part for us to follow. That’s why an installation by the Cuban artist Erik Ravelo called “The Untouchables” was banned by Facebook. It was intended to expose the issues plaguing children around the globe—war, hunger, malnutrition, sex trafficking, abuse, were each assigned to a different country. However, it was banned because the image Ravelo created for America was a nine-year-old schoolgirl in pigtails being crucified on the cross of an active shooter carrying an AR-15. The point was obvious, children are being crucified by guns and greed in America today.

There have been 378 school shootings since Columbine, which happened my senior year of High School. Since then, nearly 200 children have died, and 350,000 have experienced gun violence at school. My daughter, and all our youth have grown up doing active shooter drills every year of their education. Guns are now the leading cause of death for children in our country, and there’s no other nation on the face of the earth that has this problem. Thousands of activists are working on this every day, yet nothing seems to change. Politicians continue to offer “thoughts and prayers” instead of real action or policy changes, yet thoughts and prayers are useless to dead children. People are still getting wealthy selling military grade weapons that have no business in the hands of average citizens, while quoting from an amendment written by people who had guns that could only be loaded one round at a time with musket balls because bullets weren’t invented until the 1800s! How long will this absurdity go on? How long will the violence continue? How long can our hearts go on breaking? What are we supposed to do with all this senseless death? It feels hopeless.

Perhaps novelist Tom Mcallister has the right idea. In 2018, he wrote an essay entitled, WHAT TO DO WITH MY BODY IN THE EVENT I DIE IN A MASS SHOOTING. “Take my body” he wrote, “and don’t even clean the blood off the skin, don’t wash it out of my clothes. Don’t change my facial expression or adjust my posture. Don’t do anything to hide the reality of my death. Let people see me exactly how I was in my last moments, my face twisted in horror and confusion, my body curled unnaturally as if hunching my back could ever protect me from the bullets (nothing can protect you). I want them to see my mouth agape, my eyes feeling betrayed but also weary, because in those final moments, I know I would be shocked but not surprised (you can’t be surprised by something that happens every day; nobody is surprised to see the sun rise in the morning).



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After I've been executed for the crime of being in a public place, my final wish is for the people who enabled this crime, again and again and again, to have to face my anger and explain themselves. Lift my body off the ground and haul it from the site of my death straight to the Capitol. Parade me through the halls and bang on doors and demand that they look at what the bullets did to me. Tell them where my blood spilled and make them stick their fingers into the wounds like Thomas into Jesus's side. Don't waste time trying to convince them that I was better or more worthy of dignity than any other person, because then you're wasting your breath on a game you cannot win (all they want is win, there's going to be so much winning). Don't allow them to rank the victims in terms of their value and don't allow them to engage in any conversation aside from this: *Right here is a body that you killed, and I want to know what you're going to do about it.* They'll arrest you and they'll vilify you and they'll threaten you with their guns. Keep going back, keep showing them my body.

Every day, pile more bodies in the halls so they can't go anywhere without stepping over the victims. Force them to look down at a dead body and lift their leg over it as if stepping over a puddle. Don't join them in their prayers (the god they pray to doesn't exist). When they step over my dead body, I want them to look down into my vacant eyes and reckon with the way it ended. I want them to be transported into my mind and feel what I felt after being shot. In those final moments—as I bleed out on the tile floor of the mall, or the grass outside a summer concert, or the middle of a godforsaken classroom—I will be thinking of all the ways my own country has abandoned its people (for profit, for spite, for no reason at all).ⁱⁱⁱ

Our children are crying out "Hosanna! Hosanna! Somebody, anybody, do something! We're begging you please save us!" They're not crying out for salvation from drag shows, or "wokeness," banned books, transgender people, Critical Race Theory, LGBTQ education, Disney movies, or the truth about slavery or the holocaust. None of those things are killing children! A lot of energy is being used to protect children from things they don't need to be saved from! But what our children are actually crying out for is salvation from guns and greed, apathy and indifference, hopelessness, and resignation. Can you hear them? Our children are being crucified! Can't we do something?



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Yes, we can! We can do what Jesus did. We can walk straight into the center of political, economic, and religious power in our cities and towns and communities, we can listen to the sounds of the children crying out for salvation, and turn over the tables of the money changers, and tell the truth about the system that is crucifying our children. And we must do it over, and over again until they decide they need to crucify us too. That is what it means to follow Jesus all the way to the cross—not up to the cross, or the foot of the cross, or the shadow of the cross, but to take up our cross and follow him through the cross like the women who stood weeping at his grave.

Can you hear the children crying? Their blood is crying out to us from the ground in Columbine Newtown, Blacksburg, Miami, Charlotte, and Uvalde. Can you hear the children crying? Lives that were cut far too short are calling out to us from the graves in Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, UNCC, Robb Elementary, and Covenant. Can you hear the children crying? They are literally shouting “Hosanna! Save us!” in the state capitols like Nashville, TN. The question is, “Will we get angry like the chief priests and scribes? Will we betray, abandon, and deny them like the disciples? Or will we listen? Will we grasp the fierce urgency of this present moment and come through for our children, turn over the tables, tell the truth, take up our crosses, put our bodies on the line, and live in solidarity with people our world is crucifying? Jesus heard the children crying “Hosanna, we beg you, please, Jesus, save us!” and so he spoke the truth and gave his life for them, and that’s what it’s going to take to change the system.

ⁱ Amanda Gorman, from Tweet on May 24, 2022.

<https://twitter.com/TheAmandaGorman/status/1529218037974732800>

ⁱⁱ Tom Mcallister, “WHAT TO DO WITH MY BODY IN THE EVENT I DIE IN A MASS SHOOTING,” *The Rumpus*, February 15, 2018. <https://therumpus.net/2018/02/15/what-to-do-with-my-body-in-the-event-i-die-in-a-mass-shooting/>