

Like our lives, the service today is modified from what it normally would be. Palm Sunday usually begins with many of us gathered in the narthex, holding our palms as we hear the account of the Lord's Triumphal Entry and we act the part of the Hebrew children singing their hosannas in joyful procession to the hymn *All Glory, Laud, and Honor*. The traditional Gospel reading for Palm Sunday is the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to St. Matthew, two whole chapters, with the voices divided, the pastor reading the words of our Lord, an assistant reading the narration of the Evangelist, and the congregation once again acting the part, saying the words of all other speakers in the Passion. That is how this day is normally observed.

But we do not live in normal times. The government has asked us all to practice social distancing. So today we did not gather in the narthex. The palms are in the back for you to take as you leave. And because we have multiple services this morning, for the sake of time, that most horrid of all excuses when it comes to the things of God, we have omitted the reading of the Matthew Passion.

I say all that not to complain about our present situation (I do enough of that outside of the Divine Service), but to point out what you must understand. The pilgrims that accompany our Lord into Jerusalem for the Passover cry out "Hosanna!" It is a Hebrew word, it's meaning is not translated, but like "Amen," and "Hallelujah," it is simply taken up into other languages. It's a reminder of our heritage from the Old Testament church. "Hosanna" is not what we often think of it as, a triumphal shout of joy. It means "Save us, now." It is a cry of beggars, of pleading. It is what those who are weak and lowly, who cannot help themselves, say to the one who can, who is strong to save and able to help them.

They, and we, do right to ask that of the Lord. But what you must understand, what you must know and believe not just today, not just on Palm Sunday or in the midst of a pandemic, but for your whole life, is that the cry of "Hosanna," "Save us, now," is what we see answered in Passion. That is why that account is appointed to be read on this day. The Divine Service begins with the cry for salvation. And in Matthew's 26th & 27th chapters, we hear how that cry for salvation is answered in the betrayal, suffering, and death of our Lord.

Matthew is unique among the Evangelists in that his account fixates repeatedly on Jesus' blood. Like Mark, Luke, and St. Paul in 1 Corinthians, Matthew gives us Jesus' words concerning the cup in the institution of the Sacrament of the Altar. He speaks of the cup's contents as His blood, which is sacrificially poured out. And it is in Matthew's account that our Lord makes clear that His blood, the blood, not of the old covenant, the blood of goats and bulls, but His very own, is shed as the new testament, the new promise, which is "for the forgiveness of sins."

There you see how He saves. By shedding His blood for the forgiveness of sins. This is underscored by what we have uniquely from Matthew's pen. Judas, hearing of Jesus' condemnation to death by the priests and scribes, confesses that he has sinned "**by betraying innocent blood.**" The silver coins he casts down cannot be put into the treasury of the temple; it is blood money, used to acquire someone to be put to death. Yet again Pilate's wife sends a message to her husband, confessing Jesus as righteous. Pilate recognizes that Jesus stands before him for judgment only because of the envy of Jesus' enemies. Because he fears men, Pilate claims to wash his hands of Jesus' blood. But as we confess in the Creed, the Lord was crucified under Pontius Pilate. The facts of history, the authority of Roman judgment, cannot be denied.

In unbelieving thirst for Jesus' death, the crowd cries for His blood to be upon them and their children. Here we see one of the many ironies of the Passion. Just as Caiaphas the high priest had determined that it was better for one man to die for the people, as statement that is true, so also the cry for Jesus' blood to be upon us, is exactly what we ought to cry. Not out of unbelief, not to silence Him and get rid of Him, but because that is how He saves us. Just as the blood of the covenant at Sinai was sprinkled upon the people, sealing them into it, so our Lord, having shed His innocent blood for the forgiveness of our sins, to wipe out the stain of our iniquities, gives that blood to us.

It is on the cusp of His giving His sacred blood to us in the Liturgy that we take up the Jerusalem pilgrims' cry upon our lips. We cry for Him to save us. We cry for His blood to be upon us and in us. What you receive is the blood that endured all that we hear of during Holy Week. It is this week in which we commemorate our redemption. As altered as

it is this year by the necessities and precautions of our time, that which what most necessary, the shedding of the innocent Son of God as the sacrificial Lamb, the achieving of your salvation, has been accomplished. Our singing “Hosanna” is, then, for Christians, a triumphal shout. We boast in being beggars, in being weak. Because God’s love for us in Christ Jesus is strong to save. This is what Holy Week teaches us. Whether you are able to be here in church, whether you are sheltered in place in your home, in the isolation of an ICU, wherever you are, even upon your deathbed, in saying that word, “Hosanna,” you confess that Jesus has saved you by His blood.

And as you bear the pains and sorrows of this life, as the temptations which you endure in this world seek to overwhelm you, as Satan, your sins, viruses, old age, and wicked men seek your life, you cry out, “Hosanna,” to the Lord who delivers you from all. By His death and His resurrection deliverance comes in this life. So we cry out “Hosanna,” to be saved, relieved of the affliction of this pandemic, for quarantines and quotas to end. But we recognize also by faith, by what Jesus’ death and resurrection mean, that, should the Lord will it, when, in His wisdom, this life on earth must end, He delivers us even through death. That hope is confessed no better than in the final stanza of the chief hymn appointed for this day:

*Lord, when Your glory I shall see
And taste Your kingdom’s pleasure,
Your blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure!
When I appear before Your throne,
Your righteousness shall be my crown;
With these I need not hide me.
And there, in garments richly wrought,
As Your own bride shall we be brought
To stand in joy beside You.*