

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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TRANSFER OF POWER

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Text of a Sermon preached on Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

ISAIAH 50:4-9A | PSALM 31:9-16

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 | MARK 14:1-15:47

“Hosanna” is not just a word of joy and praise. It means, literally, “save us.” You and I find ourselves following that crazy parade through the Golden Gate, entering onto the Temple mount, where the Shekinah Spirit of the Lord had appeared in the past, and the Messiah is prophesied to return through on the last day. The singing continues: “The stone that has been rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” A growing frenzy. A hint of desperation. What is on everyone’s mind as they shout, “save us!”?

As Jesus enters the eastern gate of Jerusalem, King Herod is making his annual passage through the western gate of the city, where his garrison overlooked the Temple mount. Herod came every year to enjoy the festivities and to make sure the people were reminded of who was really in charge. Word would have gotten back to Herod of the demonstration.

Herod would have scoffed: “Save us! That crowd, that mob has no idea. Every day I make this city greater, this Temple more grand, and keep our traditions from being totally perverted by Roman corruption. And if one is smart enough, there is plenty to go around.”

A realization runs through the crowds at both ends of the city. Jesus is mocking the false idols of Roman rule, making his entrance as a humble King of peace. But what do the people think? Which way will the crowds turn? After all, there can only be one King. They want freedom, liberation, destiny, the fulfillment of prophecy – God’s rule. But they want security too, the certainties of ancestors and traditions. Something’s gotta give.

The cry, “hosanna”, “save us”, has particular resonance this year, for us. If it has not been on our lips, it has been in our hearts and minds, as we have watched our world grind to a halt, and have felt, for the first time in a long time, that we and our modern ways are not in control, that we cannot save ourselves. The systems that power us, that sustain us, have broken down.

Just a few weeks ago I thought, things are returning to normal. A few more months of vaccines and this will all be over. But today, after a few more senseless tragedies, and the realization that there is no way back to the way things were, I easily return to the crowd and raise my voice: save us!

Consider the virus itself. It was the catalyst for one of our greatest achievements of human hope and creativity, the vaccines that were invented in just days and proven in less than a year.

But also, it turns out, the virus was most likely the diabolical product of that same human invention, of human error and hubris, manufactured and escaped in a lab. The virus, created as a weapon of war, is met by the vaccines, tools for disarming the threats against us.

Save us! Rather, we need to be saved from ourselves!

Hosanna in the highest. Show us the power of God, of life, of the good, the true and the beautiful. Where will this power come from?

The telling of the events that lead to our salvation is focused on a clash of powers, the tale of two empires in a struggle to the death. On the one hand is the realm of human control – of bodies, mind and spirit – forced to do business in a market that is rigged for the rich; and on the other is a space that emerges, and then fades away, where God rules in every heart, soul, body and mind, a kingdom of life and freedom, where not everything has a price, where not everything can be traded away.

At each turn in the story, Jesus surprises, showing us glimpses of this space outside human and demonic control. He is patient with Peter, compassionate with the disciples, honest with Judas. He is fearless before the religious tribunal and Pilate. He pleads for someone to have the courage to simply stay awake and the strength to accompany him.

Curiously, Jesus himself has only one verse of Scripture on his mind. That verse is key: it marks a transfer of power, from here below, to where he promises to be, just above the horizon.

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

Jesus said, “I am; and
‘you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of the Power,’
and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

As we hear the story, and do not look away or fall asleep, we see this transfer of power at every stage, at cock crow, at dawn, at midday, as Jesus dies on the cross, at God’s right hand.

From beginning to end this story tells the truth, especially when it hurts and shames. It robs us of every reason to lie. It shows us the political and religious forces that want to use and abuse us. It reveals that every sacrifice that requires a human life not freely offered, is itself a lie. It indicts a mob, and then disarms a mob, and finally forgives the mob.

This is the greatest story ever told because it is the story of love that perseveres through every test, through every denial, through every falsehood, through every fear, through every shame, through every pain, through every ugliness, that a human heart can suffer.

And how do we actually know this? Because somewhere in it we realize there has been a transfer of power. From the west gate to the east, from the ruler of this world to King Jesus riding in on a donkey, from the executioner and judge, to the victim and innocent, in solidarity.

The reason Jesus can take on all this sin and suffering, even ours, is not because his betrayal, arrest, trial, conviction and execution is still going on, or somehow literally embraces all the horrors that the world has seen or will ever see. No. Jesus can take that all on himself because from this point on he has been tasked to do it. It has become his vocation. And still is.

This is the greatest story every told because it is finally the story of the One who lets God possess him, lets God act through him, and lets love claim us.

As we grieve over what we owe and cannot pay back, what we did and cannot fix, who we are and cannot face, we are given a standing offer to let go, to be made whole. As we convict and condemn ourselves, then power of God sets us free. This is the ransom paid. This is the power of the cross.

Somewhere on your street is a power pole. On one of those poles is a transformer, a place where energy is collected, multiplied, sent out new.

The Cross at Golgatha is God's transformer, where from below to above, from death to life, the Spirit is sent out in all directions, bringing everything it touches to life.

Hosanna! Save us! The only sacrifice pleasing to God is a contrite and humble heart. The practice of dying to self and living to God, the practice of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, is the only remedy for what ails us.

And as this story claims us, by some miracle, we see that it does not end. It comes to rest, buried deep within us, where it awakens, it rises, for us, and in us, and touches all eternity.