

United Church in the Valley: April 14, 2019

Minister: Matthew Heesing

Palm Sunday:

Making Space for the Struggle

"...of Singing Hosanna"

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 21:1-11:

Jesus and his followers were coming closer to Jerusalem.

Before they arrived,

Jesus sent two of his disciples to go on ahead.

He said to them, "Go to the small town close by.

When you enter the town,

you will find a young donkey that no one has ever ridden.

Untie it, and bring it here.

And if anyone asks why you are taking the donkey,

just tell them,

"The Lord needs it, but will send it back soon."

The disciples went and did as Jesus instructed.

They brought the donkey to Jesus, and Jesus sat on it,
riding it up into the city gates.

As he did, a very large crowd gathered,

spreading their coats on the road,

and cutting palm branches from the trees

to wave in celebration and recognition of Jesus.

The crowds that went ahead of him,

and those that followed, sang and shouted:

"Hosanna! Save us, Jesus! Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest!"

In this way, Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem.

When he did,

the whole city was stirred, and asked,

"Who is this?"

The crowds answered,

"This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Sermon:

A few years ago, a musician named Amanda Palmer published a book entitled *The Art of Asking: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Let People Help*. In it, Amanda Palmer tells the story of how “[she once] asked [her] blog readers a question. ‘What do you wish you’d asked for?’”

“There were thousands of responses,” she explains, “but the overwhelming majority were variations on this: *I wish I’d asked for help.*”¹

“Everybody struggles with asking [for help],” Amanda Palmer continues—in fact, “American culture in particular has instilled in us the bizarre notion that to ask for help amounts to an admission of failure.”² *Help* may only be four letters, but it’s loaded: it’s a surprisingly heavy word to say aloud: *Help. Help. Help me, please.*

Naming and acknowledging our need for help can often be uncomfortable—it’s difficult, a struggle, something we might fear, that much is clear, from Palmer’s queries, but over the season of Lent, and today, we have dared to do a series all about making *space* for the struggle, of wrestling with the uncomfortable, of digging a little deeper into difficult subjects, and specifically this morning, our discussion is about Making Space for the Struggle of “singing Hosanna”—and what “Hosanna” really means is “Help.” *Hosanna, Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Help, Help! Help me, please.*

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “hosanna” is only ever used in a way that insinuates “help” or “save me, I pray”—so on Palm Sunday, when the people in the crowds cry out and say

¹ Amanda Palmer, *The Art of Asking: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Let People Help*, 173

² *Ibid.*, 13.

“Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest!”

it is an emotional, powerful, prayerful petition
to the person that they believe
will save them,
the one who might rescue them from their respective situations
of social oppression,
economic exploitation, and political injustice—
the waving of the palms
and the procession that is made
is not just a joyful, jubilant parade,
it is a desperate, hopeful cry of help
to Jesus.

Help us, Jesus. Save us, Jesus.

Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.

Every year on Palm Sunday,
we commemorate this unique event,
we re-present the procession of Jesus into Jerusalem,
and every single year on Palm Sunday,
the constantly repeated proclamation of *Hosanna*
gives me pause,
it causes me to wonder:
if I were there, how would I respond?
If I were there that day,
would I be much too proud to also name aloud
my own need for help?
Would I also choose to call out for help
in such a public fashion?
Or would my sense of inner shame and inhibition
somehow hold me back?
Would my desire to be a self-sufficient person be too strong,
stopping me from singing along with that song,
Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest?

I don't know what I'd do. I really don't.

And yet, every year, regardless,
the service of Palm Sunday
directly inserts me into this story—
as we gather, as we wave our palms,
as we make our own procession to and fro,
as we sing—as one—the words from long ago,
I find myself caught up in the refrain,
that I might have rather otherwise avoided:
Hosanna, Hosanna, Help us, Jesus.

Palm Sunday consistently invites me
 into a place
 of making space for the struggle of singing hosanna
 of saying I need help,
 I don't have it all together,
 I can't hold it all together,
Help me, Jesus.
Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.

Those of us who were in a book study last year
 know that Anne Lamott calls "help"
 one of the three essential prayers—
help, thanks, and wow, she calls them—
 and in her book of that same name, she writes
 "When...my friends and I
 have run out of good ideas on how to fix the unfixable,
 when we finally stop trying to heal our own sick, stressed minds...
 when we are truly at the end of our rope and just done,
 we say the same prayer.
 We [all] say "Help."³

For "there's freedom in hitting bottom," she says,
 "...[there's immense] relief in admitting
 you've reached the place of great unknowing.
 ["Help"] is where restoration can begin..."⁴

Asking for help—
 singing hosanna—
 is uncomfortable and hard,
 it is certainly a struggle,
 but it is precisely *in* such struggle,
 that a certain sense of freedom,
 immense relief, and restoration
 lies in store.

As a result, Palm Sunday begs the question:
 in what ways do *we* need to ask for help?
 And what might be *holding us back* from doing so?
Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest.
Help, Help. Help us, Jesus.

³ Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

At the end of the service,
 our children and youth will come back up
 with homemade palms to sing one last refrain of
Hosanna, or, *Sanna Sannanina*, a rendition from South Africa.
 Before they do, however,
 there's one last idea that we need to rumble with, together.
 Because one of the hardest elements
 of asking for help,
 is that help may not arrive
 in the way we might expect.

Whenever we ask, writes Amanda Palmer,
 "there's always the possibility of a *no*
 on the other side of the request."⁵
 Whenever we cry out for help,
 we may receive it—or we might not.
 It's an inherent possibility we have to consider,
 that every request for help,
 every hosanna that we sing,
 might not be granted—
 or at least, not granted in the way that we desire.

That's what happened
 with the crowds in Jerusalem.
 Many of them were praying for a certain kind of help:
 they were hoping that Jesus was a military savior,
 here to overthrow their enemies with a sword,
 a Lord who would bring about retribution,
 a violent solution,
 was what they expected.

And yet, the help that many of the people wanted,
 was not the help they would receive.
 Jesus, you see, arrives on a donkey,
 an animal of peace, not a war horse,
 Jesus enters Jerusalem, not to overthrow
 but to show what the love of the divine truly looks like—
 Jesus—while yes, he is a Lord and King,
 is not exactly the help of which the people sing,
 a different form of kingdom is what he will bring—
 And so the kind of help the people have in mind
 is not the help that they will find.

⁵ Palmer, *Art of Asking*, 13.

And in response,
 by this Friday
 the songs of Hosanna
 and the help for which they cry,
 will turn to shouts of “Crucify,”
 as many of the people turn on Jesus
 and sentence him to die on the cross.
 Since it wasn’t the help that they expected,
 in the end, many rejected Jesus.

Part of making space
 for the struggle of singing hosanna
 has to mean wrestling with the notion
 that help may not come in the way we expect.
 The annual commemoration of Palm Sunday asks us the question,
 will we ultimately accept or reject the help that’s offered?
 If the help that we receive
 is not the help we wanted,
 how will we respond?

One of my favourite television shows of all time,
The West Wing,
 has an episode titled “Take This Sabbath Day.”
 And in that episode, a fictional priest tells the President a story:
 “You know,” the Priest says, “you remind me
 of the man that lived by the river.
 He heard a *radio report* that the river was going to
 rush up and flood the town.
 And that all the residents should evacuate their homes.
 But the man said, “I’m religious. I pray.
 God loves me. God will save me.”
 The waters rose up.
 A guy in a *row boat* came along and he shouted,
 “Hey, hey you! You in there!
 The town is flooding.
 Let me take you to safety.”
 But the man shouted back,
 “I’m religious. I pray. God loves me.
 God will save me.”
 [Afterwards] A *helicopter* was hovering overhead.
 And a guy with a megaphone shouted,
 “Hey you, you down there.
 The town is flooding.
 Let me drop this ladder, and I’ll take you to safety.”
 But the man shouted back that he was religious,

that he prayed, that God loved him and that
 God will take him to safety.
 Well, the man drowned.
 And standing at the gates of St. Peter,
 he demanded an audience with God.
 “Lord,” he said, “I’m a religious man. I pray.
 I thought you loved me. Why did this happen?”
 God said, “I sent you a radio report,
 a helicopter, and a guy in a rowboat.
 What the hell are you doing here?”

As Anne Lamott once wrote,
*“Was my prayer [for help] answered?
 Yes—
 although I did not get what I’d hoped and prayed for.”*⁶

Sometimes, we sing hosanna,
 we ask for help,
 and what we receive is not what we wanted.
 The story of Palm Sunday not only asks us
 questions of
 how we might need help,
 and what might be holding us back from asking,
 but also
 how will we face and even embrace
 the help that we eventually receive?

For Jesus didn’t save the *Hosanna* singing crowd
 the way that they desired and expected.
 Jesus may not save *us*
 in the ways we imagine and hope for,
 Jesus may not even save the church—
 at least, perhaps not how we picture it or pray—
 and in what way will we then respond?
 With rejection? With a turning away?
 Or with a willingness
 to keep making space for the struggle—
 the struggle of *continuing* to sing
 hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest.
Help us, help us, help us Jesus—
 trusting in the one who truly frees us.

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest.
 Thanks be to God.

⁶ Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, 30.