

Hosanna!

Hosanna, Loud Hosanna, the little children sang is the opening line of the hymn which we will sing ourselves this morning as we close today's service. And the word hosanna has most often for many years been used in the sense which even in our Webster's dictionaries is the last meaning given of the word: an exclamation used to give praise to God. We think of this first day of Holy Week as a day of celebration, probably for a couple of reasons. Primarily, we are Easter People and we know at the end of the week, no matter how dark that Friday was, on that Sunday morning the tomb was found to be empty. But here, even at the beginning of the week with the darkness still ahead, we still find the passages describing the events as celebrations. Most of the translations of our scriptures which insert subtitles before the separated passages, sections which were not present in the original Greek documents will list the passage as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, describing crowds shouting loudly "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord; Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" The crowds cut palm branches and put them down before him as before a returning conqueror. The crowds were acting in anticipation of a returning king to the throne of Israel...yet this had never been the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was near. Jesus' proclaimed the possibility that the kingdom...the reign of God was near...but as with the people in the time of Samuel, the last judge and first prophet of Israel, the people wanted an earthly king not a heavenly one. So when Jesus demonstrated power and proclaimed the possibility of God's reign being near...the people saw and hoped for an end to their being subject to the rule of Rome. This is the paradox present in the descriptions of this day which is why as we enter the week we call Holy, it is often referred by two names: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. As people we much prefer to think about the joy and celebration of a triumphal entry where the crowds welcome Jesus as their Lord and Savior, recognizing him as the Messiah. The hosannas ringing loudly sound as praises to God in our ears, yet the meaning of the words which were being shouted in the minds of the people shouting them were heartfelt pleas; prayers for rescue: Help us! Save Us! Those were the meanings of the words being shouted in Hebrew. Perhaps we need to look closely at the gospel narratives to see how this story unfolded and to understand more fully how God answered their prayer so completely even if it was not done in the manner they actually expected or requested. The situation in the Roman occupied land of Palestine was troubled that year; the people were restless under the harsh rule of Caesar's taxes and the puppet King Herod that had been placed on the throne of Israel. History outside of our scriptures documents these facts. The religious leaders of the time were nervous because they were allowed to hold their offices and status only so long as the occupiers who held power allowed them their privileges. The times around the traditional religious festivals were especially tense as the capital city of Jerusalem was flooded with pilgrims from the countryside; pilgrims from many regions coming to celebrate and bringing with them news and rumors. In response to possible trouble, the highest ranking Roman official in the province also arrives with additional military support to take up residence in the city ready to suppress any trouble. It is into this mix of unrest that the gospel narratives of Holy Week are told. It is likely that there were two groups entering Jerusalem that day, maybe even about the same time, just

by different gates. Pilate and his group of Roman soldiers would have entered with much pomp and ceremony by the main gate; wanting to impress upon the people of the city that they were Roman subjects. He probably entered on a war horse accompanied by a squadron or two of battle hardened Roman soldiers to a welcoming crowd shouting acclamations because of the threat of what would happen to the city if he wasn't pleased with his reception. This type of crowd demonstration is easy enough to envision because it still happens in places where dictators rule and oppression occurs. Our scriptures do not even mention this entrance by Pilate and his soldiers. Although as the week unfolds we do find out that Pilate has indeed taken up residence in Jerusalem for this Passover season and what a crucial role unusual his presence during this time has. Our scriptures have given us a description of Jesus' entry into this other gate, this gate near the Mount of Olives which was a minor gate which allowed entrance near the Temple itself. The passages tell us that Jesus' entry was marked by a welcoming crowd who had expectations for what his presence would mean. What is actually more telling about what happens in the coming week are the events which have transpired leading up to Jesus coming to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Jesus has been drawing larger and larger crowds, crowds who have not only heard him teaching, but who have witnessed him doing deeds of power...he has been healing people and restoring them to their communities. Sometimes this has been the restoration of sight, the healing of lepers, the casting out of demons, and in John's narrative Jesus has just restored his friend Lazarus to life. The news of what this Jesus of Nazareth is capable of doing is spreading like wild-fire among the people; this news strikes fear into the heart of the religious leaders as they view his power as a threat to their own, especially as he is quite critical of their hypocrisy. The more popular Jesus becomes, the more they view him as a threat to their status and security. This is often a truth about those who attain power, they fear the loss of it and will do anything to retain it. In John's gospel we are told there are Greeks who want to "see" Jesus. The entry that Jesus makes into Jerusalem riding on a borrowed donkey is an illustration of what he has been trying to teach about the kingdom of God through his parables; the illustrations he has been giving about serving and caring for the members of the community as revealed in the covenants given to the people. The reading from the Hebrew Scripture this morning actually comes from the suffering servant section of Isaiah. The portion most often lifted up during this Easter Season concerns the abuse that Jesus suffered after his arrest, but today I would point out the opening verse: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught." Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching and in prayer. Even during these final days he spent time in the Temple courtyard teaching, in the garden praying and teaching his disciples. The teachings of Jesus were about a type of power which was in direct opposition to the type of power displayed by Rome. Rome and those who carried out its occupations were all about coercive power—power that is outward, enforced and mandatory, a do-it-or-else-power. This was the power shown when Pilate rode in on his war horse accompanied by the Roman soldiers. On Palm Sunday, Jesus' dramatically enacted his definitive choice to exercise a different type of power. This power is non-coercive power. It is power which comes from within and is based on a voluntary do-it-if-you-choose power. Jesus knew he had within himself the power to achieve the "earthly things" which the crowd had in mind, but his choice was to be obedient to the mission he had undertaken to redeem all of humanity by the difficult path to

the cross. He chose the path of service, of giving of himself in love for others. So as the crowd gathers in Jerusalem for that Passover and anticipates that their Messiah has come to redeem the earthly throne of David, it is ironic that their hosannas are being answered in such an unexpected way. The crowd does not recognize the redemption which is being given to them which will totally change the meaning of that word. Jesus has never spoken of the throne of David being restored, but always about the kingdom and reign of God coming near. The message and proclamation which we have been given is still there...God's reign is as near now as it was then...it is present within when we follow the teachings given to us and revealed as God's way for us. Hosanna! God has answered our prayers so we can loudly sing praises to God's holy name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.