

## **Hosanna**

*Mark 11:1-11*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

I wonder where you find yourself in this story?

Maybe you prefer “behind the scenes” work, so you see yourself as one of the two unnamed disciples who were sent out to procure that never-before-ridden donkey?

Maybe, you’re the kind of person who changes the lightbulbs in the church bathrooms or who cleans the church kitchen from top to bottom or who plants the flowers in the church plants or who fills the baptistry and makes sure it’s warm for those being baptized or cleans up the communion cups from the pew backs after worship. Maybe you see yourself as one of the donkey *fetchers*.

Or maybe you’re the kind of person whose contribution isn’t in the act so much as in providing the resources. Maybe life and work don’t allow you an abundance of extra time, but you have been blessed with the ability to scholarship a camper or to help out someone who needs rent assistance or to gladly pay for the t-shirts for the youth group’s fall retreat. (BTW – if that last one is you, do us a favor and get in touch with Katie, okay?)

So maybe in this story you don’t see yourself so much as the donkey fetcher, but as the donkey *loaner* – the one who is more than happy to share what you have with Jesus.

Or maybe you are like me, and on days like today you find yourself caught up in the parade – waving your palm, throwing your coat on the ground, shouting and singing and whooping and hollering in praise of Jesus. I mean, it’s hard to not want to celebrate when we get to have a baptism on such a beautiful day. And then someone hands us one of these palms which – let’s be honest – sort feels like a pom-pom that you can’t help but wave. It’s like a ticker-tape parade. And it’s the only Sunday of the year that I wish we had a confetti canon to fire in the service!

Do you remember what that crowd shouts as they dance and sing and shout and march down the road with Jesus? They shout:

“*Hosanna!*

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

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor, David!

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*” (Mk. 11:9-10).

Do you know what “Hosanna” means? It means “Save us now.”

By the time of Jesus, it had become such a familiar liturgical phrase that most people had completely forgotten what it even meant. It was simply a generic term for praising God.

The deep irony of this scene is that the crowd was calling out “Save us now!” to Jesus — whose name means “Savior” — but they had no earthly idea what exactly they needed saving from.

And it’s got me thinking, do *we* know what it is that we actually need saving from?

In the forward to his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the author Neil Postman writes this (and keep in mind, he wrote this in 1985):

“We were keeping our eye on 1984 [he’s, of course, referencing George Orwell’s famous novel]. When the year came and the prophecy didn’t, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

“But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell’s dark vision, there was another — slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies... [and self-gratification].

“As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us” (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, xiv-xx).

Friends, maybe we don’t really know what we need saving from, because we’re still looking in all the wrong places. Maybe what we most need saving from isn’t our enemies, but ourselves.

Do you remember why Jesus chose to come into Jerusalem on that colt?

Kings did not ride donkeys. When kings paraded into town, they rode horses or chariots. They rode on the backs of mighty animals, animals that served as symbols of their power, animals that were instruments of war, animals that communicated the message, "Don't mess with me." But not Jesus. He came riding in on a baby donkey that had never before been ridden — that hadn't even been broke.

Can you imagine the scene?

A well-trained war horse was a sight to behold: enormous in stature, decked out in ornate regalia, its hooves marching with enough force to make the earth shake. Even in the heat of battle, spears thrusting and swords flailing, a well-trained war horse wouldn't move, wouldn't budge. Even in battle it was like a statue, elevating its rider above the fray and giving him the advantage over those fighting from the ground.

But an untrained donkey? A donkey that had never before been ridden? Can you imagine how skittish and uncertain and awkward that ride must have been for Jesus?

Why a donkey, Jesus? Why not a war horse?

Because Jesus is not the kind of king we think we want or we think we love. He is not a military general ready to lead a mighty conquest. He is the Prince of Peace, and so he rode in on the most harmless, most non-threatening animal he could find — because it was never his goal to save us from our enemies. The way of Jesus was always about saving us from ourselves.

Do we even know what it is that we need saving from? Could we see it even if we were looking in a mirror?

You see, the church is supposed to provide *a different way* of being in the world. We are supposed to model *a different way* of seeing reality and offer *a different way* of living in it.

In a world that seeks power and wealth and influence and followers; in a world where kings ride war horses in their victory parades — we Christians are supposed to be different.

We're supposed to be donkey fetchers and donkey loaners and the kind of people who cry out, "Hosanna!" because, though we aren't quite sure what we need saving from, we're fairly certain that we are part of the problem.

We are supposed to look to Jesus when we don't know the way forward. We are supposed to point to Jesus when others are looking for the way forward. We are supposed to follow Jesus — not know everything there is to know about Jesus, but to do our best to model Jesus' way of being in this world.

John Buchanan is now a retired Presbyterian minister, but before he retired he shared about an important moment in his ministry. Looking back, he writes:

"Every spring when our church confirms members of our confirmation class, I reflect on my own experience of joining the church. We didn't call it confirmation back then — that was something the Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans did. We Presbyterians simply joined the church when we arrived at seventh grade. The point was to be able to take communion [he confesses].

"In seventh grade I joined 'communicants' class.' Seven of us gathered in the minister's study on a weekday after school for six weeks. We memorized as much of the Westminster Shorter Catechism as we could, knowing that at the end of the process the elders of the church would test us. [On those nights], the minister would read the questions and we'd repeat the answers over and over until we could say them in unison. There are 107 questions and answers. I'm not sure we got to number 107, and I don't remember ever talking about the meaning of what we were memorizing....

Happily we no longer think like that. Faith is more likely to be defined as following Jesus and becoming part of his people than as having memorized ideas about him....

I thought about all of that as I laid hands on the heads of members of this year's confirmation class, particularly when I came to my granddaughter, Rachel.

I don't think Rachel could have memorized enough of the catechism to pass the test in the old days. Rachel has Down syndrome and is part of a group of young persons who talked a lot together during the year, served meals to the homeless, stayed overnight in a homeless shelter and experienced church as a place of service and celebration in Jesus' name.

They each wrote a statement of faith, and they brought tears to my eyes when I read them, particularly Rachel's. 'Jesus means church for me,' she wrote. 'Church is faith. I feel church all the time. I go to church to learn about God, to worship, and to be thankful for Jesus'" ("My church, Rachel's church," *The Christian Century*, June 1, 2010).

Friends, when we do it right, *Jesus means church.*

The world cries "Hosanna!" Will the church answer?

If not us, then who?

And if not now, then when?

Amen.