



What Are We Doing Here?

Week 6: Celebration & Praise

Brian Mattson - 03/29/2026

Hear these words from the Gospel of John:

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

- John 12:12-19

Our scripture lesson for today comes from perhaps the most jubilant moment in Jesus's story—his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It's one of the most well known events in the Bible, partly because we can all relate to it. We all know what parades look and feel like. The revelry, the noise, the fun, and joy. Parades aren't sad spaces. Unless, like Curtis Tipton, you are trying to keep an entire high school band organized and under control for an hour before the parade starts, in frigid temperatures with sleet coming down. That might make you sad. But...for everyone else, the crowds and kids, parades are fun!

There's candy, clowns (or at least Shriners in little go-karts), floats, bubbles, music, and a general sense of merriment. They are celebrations. Jubilations. Coronations. We just had a parade two weeks ago to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. We have a Christmas parade, an Independence Day parade. We parade our graduates around in May, and little monsters around at Halloween. At the start of this service, our kids paraded around with palm branches, reenacting our scripture lesson for today, helping give us a sense of the celebration of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

And that wasn't some random Saturday in Jerusalem. It was the season of Passover when the population in the city swelled with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visiting. So many people that the suburbs were filled to the brim too. This was the grandest occasion for the Jewish people in ancient Israel. A time to celebrate the defining act of Israelite history—the Exodus from Egypt.

Today, we are talking about our prayers of celebration and praise. You heard it in that scripture passage—Hosanna! We know that word as a shout of praise. *Hosanna! Hosanna! The people cried.* But what the heck does hosanna even mean? A couple things, actually. It's a Greek word that comes from Hebrew and Aramaic roots, the meaning of which is "Save (us), we pray." You're probably thinking, "Hmmm...that doesn't sound like a celebration."

You're right. It sounds more like a cry for help. So how did a cry for help turn into an exclamation? The answer lies in the Psalms.

William Barclay notes that the word *hosanna* was used similarly to how the British might shout, "God save the King!" A plea for divine help, but more than that, an exaltation and unifying motto. Some former pastors might cry out *Roll Tide* in a similar fashion, but we don't do that anymore round these parts. *Hosanna* was lifted from a very important psalm, 118, and is the final one in a series of psalms of praise, 113-118, known as the Hallel, which means to praise God. This collection of psalms was an important part of celebrating God during Passover and other major Jewish festivals. Over time, this cry for help came to be known more for its messianic expectations and anticipation of salvation, a kind of national cheer. The two verses referenced in the John passage sound like this:

Save us (Hosanna), we beseech you, O LORD!

O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.

-Psalm 118:25-26a

Hosanna is taking on two meanings at the same time. It's as if the people are saying, "Save Us!" while simultaneously saying, "Salvation is here!" And at Jesus's entrance parade, the people added an additional refrain—the King of Israel! So now our parade of celebration has been upgraded to include a coronation. The people are outright calling Jesus the king here, making the Pharisees none too happy. But there's no stopping this parade now. There is too much jubilation in the air. Many in this crowd around Jesus just witnessed him raising Lazarus from the dead in John's gospel. This *must* be the messiah! This *must* be the King! This party is now completely off the hook and onto a donkey. Wait, a donkey? What kind of king rides a donkey?

That's kind of the point Jesus is making here. *What kind of king is Jesus?* The people are crying out *hosanna*, referencing Psalm 118—a psalm of victory or

conquest—because the king is here. It's time to overthrow the Romans and take Israel back. Salvation has come. Let's celebrate! But just as the word *hosanna* holds two meanings, the image of a king has its own duality.

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In the synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the donkey that Jesus rides was planned in advance. Jesus sent two disciples into the village to fetch the donkey or the colt of a donkey, depending on which account you read. In our passage from John, Jesus “found a donkey and sat on it” as if it was an improvised decision. But the interesting thing to note is not whether it was planned or not, but that the king would be on a donkey. Now this is where we lose a little of the donkey's significance, far removed from that time and culture. Because Jesus riding a donkey was an eye-opening action on two fronts.

First, and most obvious, is the fulfillment of the prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, slightly misquoted in John's gospel.

“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!”

The actual verse in Zechariah is:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

This is a prophecy about the messianic king of Israel. David's descendant who is promised to usher in hope and reconciliation to the city of Zion; Jerusalem. A humble king. You see, Jesus was reshaping the crowd's calls for a king to change the military or political landscape. Jesus was not interested in those things. Jesus was coming as a peaceful king. That's why he was on a donkey.

In the ancient near-east, kings rode on horses to initiate wars. They rode on donkeys to usher in peace. Jesus is showing the people that he was not coming into glory to conquer others, but to show us how to conquer ourselves. This sort of kingship Jesus displayed was an act of humility, an act of peace. It's a model for our own lives.

Now, you can imagine in all the hysteria of the parade, the shouts of praise, how this symbolic act was overlooked. The scripture says the disciples didn't understand this at first, but only remembered it after the resurrection. And this points to another duality of this event. This marked the beginning of what we call Holy Week, a commemoration of Christ's events during his last week, from the triumphal entry up to Easter morning. This is a week of emotional highs and lows. A whiplash of feelings. Which is exactly what life is on a long enough timeline. We experience all phases of life. This week in Jesus's story featured soaring heights of praise and thanksgiving, and the crushing lows of agony and death, isolation and despair. And to top it all off, Jesus was resurrected from the grave and his followers were left in awe and amazement. *Surely, Jesus was the messiah* they must've thought.

If we return to our scene with Jesus on a donkey riding into town with adoring crowds, it's easy to see how these people, long oppressed by the Roman empire, could lift their prayers of celebration to God. Things are easy right now. The future is looking bright for the Jewish people in Jerusalem with this new king on the scene. Even the Pharisees could sense that the people were elated and excited for what Jesus represented, a direct threat to their authority.

It's easy to offer our prayers of praise and celebration when things are going good. Have you ever tried to do it when life isn't sunshine and rainbows? It's nearly impossible. It's easy to become blinded or numb when things aren't going our way. Jesus was never one to encourage his followers to take the easy path though. And this parade, this transition into the final week of his life, gives way to some of Jesus's most intense and profound teachings. This

scene full of duality and paradox continues when some Greeks on pilgrimage hope to get a word in with Jesus. He knows his time is nearing the end and says to the disciples:

“The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

- John 12:23-25 MSG

I love The Message translation of verse 25. Love it. *Anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go—let it go— and become reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.* This is a sentiment Jesus repeats many places in the gospels, so it must be important. And I think what he’s saying is that for us to be the most human, to live the godliest life—an eternal life—is to follow Jesus’s model of selfless love. *Reckless* love. Love that doesn’t make sense. That kind of life is worth more than one life. That kind of life is a seed, producing fruit over and over and over again.

And while Jesus is talking about his impending physical death, he is also describing our own spiritual deaths, where we die to our selfish ambitions and desires. When we bury our former lives, and instead live the model Jesus gave us, we are marked by sacrifice, service, and self-denial.

We celebrate those kinds of lives. We recognize public affirmations of faith in baptisms and confirmation, representing a newness of life for the believer. And at funerals, we celebrate life on earth giving way to a newness of life after death. Holy moments. Both celebrations of new lives.

In the dualistic world of the Kingdom of God, where the meek shall be strong, the powerful are peaceful, and love is a currency, our prayers of praise and

celebration encompass both ends of the spectrum of life—those times of pure happiness and joy, and the times of immense sadness. Because really, even in death, we celebrate life. To exist is a gift.

Losing a loved one or experiencing trauma is a terrible thing. And when the wounds are fresh, the grief is present, prayers of celebration seem feeble. But with enough time, enough therapy, enough healing, our hope is that we continue to praise God for the gift of this life.

There's an interview from a few years ago with Anderson Cooper and Stephen Colbert where they discuss grief. Take a look at this clip from it.

[COOPER-COLBERT CLIP](#)

In an infinitely expanding universe, whose depth and breadth are incomprehensible to the human mind, you are here. You carry the spark of the Creator with you. Your soul shares its identity with the everlasting God who became finite to show us a way to be the most human we can be. So we continue to call out, like the crowds we remember on Palm Sunday, "Hosanna!"

One of the things we can do when we pray is celebrate. That is not an invitation for us to force ourselves into prayers of praise and celebration despite all we see happening in and around us. It's an invitation for us to embrace the duality that was there in "Hosanna" from the beginning. A cry for rescue mixed with an expression of hope and faith that we are already rescued. An acknowledgement that we will die AND we will live. Hosanna. Save us. You are saving us. You will save us.

This holy life is worth celebrating. And we join with the ancient prayer of praise from the 4th century, borrowing words that predate Jesus from the psalms:

**Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

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

Hosanna in the highest.