“Save us, we pray”

Singing Hosannas is fun. I remember learning some of the music from “Jesus Christ Superstar” when I was in Junior High. One of my favorites was singing “Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna, sanna ho-sanna hey sanna hosanna. Hey JC, JC you’re all right by me, sanna ho, sanna hey, super star.” Like a lot of the music from that rock opera, as it was called, it was catchy, fun to sing, and felt cool. We were praising God with music that was our own. I still liked the traditional music but there was something joyful and peppy and easy to understand about this music. It might also have helped that it seemed to make some adults uncomfortable. Some even went to the extreme of saying that it was blasphemous or sacrilegious.

I wonder if they would have been so concerned or we would have been so enthusiastic if we knew that that hosanna means “save us, we pray” in Hebrew. The people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts not of praise but pleading for salvation. What they were asking for salvation from who was entering Jerusalem from the opposite direction—Pilate and the Roman Army.

The Romans knew that during the Passover celebration the population of Jerusalem would quadruple. All of those people celebrating the liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian servitude were a recipe for trouble. There could be riots and even an uprising. The best way to keep the *Pax Romana* (the Roman Peace) was by a show of force.

Not only would the soldiers march into the city, but their fortress overlooked the Temple Mount. From there they could keep an eye on all that was happening in the precincts of the Temple. Like today where groups of Israeli soldiers armed with Uzis patrol the old city, I am sure the Roman soldiers armed with swords patrolled the crowded streets, shopping stalls, and inns of Jerusalem. It would take a brave or foolish soul to try to start something violent with so many eyes watching. What’s more the Sadducees who were in charge of the Temple did not want any funny business, because it was their agreement with the Romans that they could keep control of the Temple as long as all stayed peaceful.

But this rabbi enters Jerusalem not with an army or in a chariot, but on a donkey. There are people putting palm branches across his path as if he were a conquering hero. They are shouting save us, we pray. And there is no mistaking that their shouts have less to do with spiritual salvation than with political and military salvation. “Jesus Christ Superstar” gets a lot of the story and the theology of the Jesus Movement wrong. One thing they get right is when the people sing Hosanna and they sing “won’t you fight for me” and later “won’t you die for me.” The crowd was looking for a Messiah in the mold of Saul, David or the Maccabees—a warrior king who would free them from Roman oppression. There could be no better time than at the Passover.

It does not seem that this adulation went to Jesus’ head, but it did to others. I think that could be one reason that it took such a short time for the crowds to be disillusioned with Jesus. They were expecting instant freedom and salvation. When Jesus did not provide it they started to turn against him. In just five days the crowds would go from shouts of “Hosanna” to shouts of “Crucify him, crucify him.”

We humans are a fickle race. We want our needs met ASAP. They had been under the thumb of Rome for nearly one hundred years and their patience was short. Jesus parades into Jerusalem and all he does is teach and preach. There are no miracles, no uprisings, and no call to arms. What good is he if he cannot get the Romans off of our backs? Additionally, the Romans and Sadducees are aware that the crowds were restless. A good way to quiet their restlessness was to kill the purported leader of any rebellion. Crucify him like a political rebel and show them the results of standing against Roman authority.

But I am getting ahead of myself and the scripture. That does not happen for another five days. Today, we like the disciples of old, can revel in the adulation of the crowds. We can sing and shout “hosanna.” We can celebrate today and walk with the disciples through the week and witness and wonder at what is happening. When we reach Maundy Thursday, we have the opportunity to do what the disciples could not do and stay awake with Jesus for one hour in our Garden of Gethsemane. We can suffer with them through the liturgy of Good Friday. Come Easter morning we can be as startled as they were at the Good News of the Risen Christ.

The poet Maria Howe titled a poem “You think it happened once and long ago.” I think that is the way Christians often see the Jesus story, especially the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Yet, every time I read part of the Jesus story I get the feeling that what happened is isolated to the past only if we box it in. The Passion of Jesus is happening all around us every single day. Jesus is being crucified in the atrocities in Ukraine and other wars. Jesus is being crucified with the women, girls and boys who are trafficked. Jesus is crucified when people become addicted to drugs or die from gang violence. Jesus is crucified wherever there is violence, hunger, fear, racism, sexism, and all of the myriad injustices that we humans perpetrate on each other and on creation.

If we want to see resurrection, we have to live resurrection. That means we also have to walk the way of the cross recognizing and feeling the harsh power of empires and principalities. We have to experience the death of all that keeps us from loving and caring for one another as Jesus did. It is not easy. We cannot get to resurrection without the crucifixion. We have to die to ego, selfishness, and privilege to be resurrected into the people we were made to be. That is people of compassion, love, and caring.

Do not miss the chance to walk the way of the cross in your life. Witness with the onlookers the strength of love in a man walking to his death. Fall on your knees at the anguished cry of “My God why have you forsaken me?” Live the desolation of the disciples. Witness the tomb that holds only those things which have died that you might live in a new resurrected life. Wonder at the great gift we have been given in Jesus of Nazareth who suffered for the world that we might have new life in God’s glorious kingdom.