

“What's in it for Me?”
Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11
April 9, 2017
Palm Sunday
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

Hosanna. That's what the crowds shouted. Hosanna. That's what we sang a few minutes ago:

“Hosanna, loud hosanna.” That's what you all sang last week during the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving before Communion. “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty, heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.” Hosanna. What does that mean? Actually it is two Hebrew words put together that means “Save now.” Save now, save us now. It comes from Psalm 118 that beseeches the king to save his people, to save them now. Save us now! The people are not only welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, they are asking for help. They want to be saved. I guess that's often our reaction when we encounter Jesus, whether it is when we come to church or whether we stop to pray—save me, help me, and do it now, please. The people of Jerusalem certainly had reason to ask. They are looking for a Messiah, looking for a king, looking for someone to deliver them from the Romans.

Hosanna, save us now, O Lord. Is that what we pray, what we sing? What do we want to be saved from? Political oppression like the Jews of Jesus' time. Not so much, not unless we live in Syria or Russia or South Sudan or a place like that. But what about from illness—save us. Or from poverty, or insecurity, or prejudice, there are plenty of things that we need to be saved from, aren't there? But as we think about those things, don't you think it's sort of strange that we always ask God for things?

Please give me, please help me, please save me—Hosanna. Sure I'll wave my palms when you come into the city, but will you help us? Sure I'll shout with the crowds, but what will you do for me? Will you help me? Hosanna—save us now. Sure I'll come to church, but what will you do for me, Jesus? Will you entertain me for an hour? Will you help me feel good about myself? Will you give me a place to belong? Will you educate me, help me raise my children, give me some sort of purpose?

What's in it for me?

Actually I hope all those things happen, but they are sort of side effects of faith, aren't they? I was

touched this week when I was reading a devotional for Lent by the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. He says that when we have faith, in fact when we are baptized, when we decide to follow Christ, what's in it for us is that we become different. When we belong to Christ we can become unafraid. That struck me, because there are plenty of things in the world of which I am afraid. One just has to watch the news this morning and there are fears of confrontations with Russia over Syria, fears of terrorism in Sweden with this weekend's truck attack, fears of being Christian in a place like Egypt where a church was bombed this morning. Let alone fears of sickness, loss, financial issues, failure, all kinds of things. But think about in the Bible whenever an angel or a message from God comes to a human being, it almost always starts, "Do not be afraid." Fear not. Maybe the message to us is not just to be unafraid of the angel, but by God's spirit we can be unafraid all the time. Maybe that's how we are different. Maybe that's what's in it for us.

Brueggemann says, "We are different when baptized. The Acts account of the early church says that the Spirit of God come upon the ones baptized, even as the Spirit came upon Jesus in baptism. A lot of silliness is taught about the spirit coming in baptism. But what the Spirit does is visit our lives—our persons, our bodies, our imagination, our money—with the freedom of God, so that we are unafraid in the world, able to live differently, not needing to control, not needing to dominate, not needing to accumulate, not driven by anxiety. The book of Acts is the study of the baptized, the ones the Spirit visits, the ones who are unafraid in the world. It says of that community of known, named, and unafraid people, "They turned the world upside down" Acts 17:6. Or better to say, they turned the world right side up.

"The truth is that frightened people will never turn the world, because they use too much energy on the protection of self. It is the vocation of the baptized, the known and named and unafraid, to make the world whole:

- The unafraid are open to the neighbor, while the frightened are defending themselves from the neighbor.

- The unafraid are generous in the community, while the frightened, in their anxiety, must keep and store and accumulate, to make themselves safe.
- The unafraid commit acts of compassion and mercy, while the frightened do not notice those in need.
- The unafraid are committed to justice for the weak and the poor, while the frightened see them only as threats.
- The unafraid pray in in the morning, care through the day, and rejoice in the night in thanks and praise, while the frightened are endlessly restless and dissatisfied.”¹

So which are we? We are baptized, we are God's children, we have the Spirit that draws us together and empowers us. Have we become a community of the unafraid? Jesus was able to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday knowing what the week was going to hold for him. How could he do that? The same way we can. Because he believed that there was something beyond the cross of Good Friday. Just the same way we believe that any of those things we fear, death, sickness, terror, failure, none of those have the last word. That's what's in this Christian life for us. We give up being afraid, because we have hope.

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. *A Way Other Than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*. 2017. pp. 60-61.