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The Message: Jenny, Jerusalem and Jesus

My husband and I led a group of 20 students from his theological college on a trip to Israel. We stayed in the Arab quarter just outside the old city of Jerusalem. Each day we would walk through one of the gates into that ancient golden city.

One morning I was at the front of the group as we walked in and there was a man with a donkey ready to give someone a ride.

Weighed down my a camera and a bag with enough food to feed lunch to most of the student group we were leading, I held back and shook my head. But I didn't move fast enough.

Suddenly I was propelled on to the back of the donkey and it took off at what felt like great speed over the cobblestones. Alone. Without its owner. Our group stood still, dumbfounded to see one of their leaders disappearing down a narrow street lined with stone buildings. With bags and dignity flying, I bumped along, clinkety clack, to the bottom of the hill, turned a corner to go through an archway and up a hill, where a group of Palestinian men took one look, raised their hands, shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna!"

Those other days I walked through the gates without anything special happening, but that one day, thanks to Jenny the donkey, its somewhat aggressive owner, and strangers on a hill, my entrance into Jerusalem was special.

Jesus had walked through those gates often. But this time too, it was special.

For the demonstration march into Jerusalem, Jesus requested a donkey to ride. Preacher Jesus assumed that everyone would quickly catch on to his show-and-tell lesson on servanthood. Zechariah 9:9 speaks of God who is coming not only as "humble and riding on a donkey," but as "triumphant and victorious" as the oppressors are forced out of power. The crowd that gathered for the demonstration wanted to have their occupied country set free of Roman rule.

The donkey was a beast of burden. Jesus' ride symbolically trampled not only the Roman rule, but the privilege of the high priesthood who collaborated with the foreign occupation. Jesus dramatized the hope that Israel would be a servant people, with neither Rome nor corrupt religious leaders over them.

People threw their cloaks on the back of the donkey and on the cobblestone he rode on. Palm branches waved madly. Shouts of "Hosanna" greeted Jesus all along the palm parade route. "Hosanna" means "save us." Jesus boldly walked toward the power seat amid the cries and hopes of a people longing for freedom.

What is the difference between those other entrances --

People misread the signs -- they thought he was coming as a military leader to overthrow the oppressors. But Jesus entered Jerusalem, not with swords but with tears. You may remember from a few weeks ago how Luke tells us that, as Jesus neared the city, he wept over it, crying out, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now

they are hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:41-42). Jesus entered the city, not with guns and tanks, but with the power of self-giving love.

The Palm Sunday story is the story of a God on the move. It is the story of a God who is in the business of making all things new, a God who will not rest satisfied until all humanity, all creation, is transformed. Jesus comes, not simply to make minor repairs in the world, but much more, to *reclaim* the world. That's what this special entrance was about.

It's a cautionary tale. Not only for those waving branches, but for us too. It's so easy to misread the signals, the signs of the times.

The civil rights leader Robert Spike recalls overhearing a conversation on a plane flying out of Jackson Mississippi between a Catholic nun and her companion. The nun laments all the protests, and complains about "outside agitators," the students and church leaders who have come to her state to support civil rights, certain that their presence is provoking violence on the part of white racists. She said,

"I do not question their dedication, nor even the rightness of their position. But surely it is a bad thing to create turmoil by stirring up people who feel differently."

As the sister talks, all the while she is nervously fingering a cross.

There's a tragic irony in the nun's words and actions, not unlike that of the first Holy Week.

Had Jesus followed the sister's philosophy, he would never have taken the risk of going to Jerusalem and proclaiming a new way of living, would never have confronted comfortable patterns and ultimately endured the cross .

The word "Hosanna" is combined of two words meaning to save and to pray. So you might translate the shouts of the crowd as:

"We beg you to save us. We pray to you to save us." The people cheered.

They tossed branches from the nearby trees to the ground, they threw their cloaks down on the cobblestones and they called out, "Hosanna!" They looked upon this prophet--rumored to be the Messiah--and they cried out to him, "Save us. Save us." The meaning of Palm Sunday hangs on those two words--on that simple plea. Do we feel compelled to shout "Save us!" to our God as we prepare for Holy Week?

Can we boldly cry out, "Hosanna?" Do we dare imagine what we really want God to save us from?

- Save me from anger.
 - from illness.
 - from depression.
 - from debt.
- Save me from the strife in my family.
 - from boredom.
 - from violence.
 - from humiliation.
- Save me from arrogance.

- from loneliness.
- from bitterness.
- Save me, God, save me from my fears.

"Hosanna." "Save us." Please God take the broken places that will tear us apart and make them whole. "Save us." "Hosanna!"

How does God save us?

In experiencing the fullness of Holy Week, what comforts me is that this story is about God being *with* us. Part of being saved involves a God who would step right into the messiest parts of life with us.

God steps out of grandeur to stand with us in awkward places at awful times to experience life and death. God answers our cries of "Hosanna!" in ways so utterly unexpected that we have got to look twice to see if they can possibly be true.

I wonder... Is there any better way to commence Holy Week than with "Hosannas" on our lips? Is there any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey than to ask God, out of the deep, honest places inside of us, to "Save us... please, save us"?

And those cloaks ... When I think about those precious cloaks that were laid on the back of the donkey and even thrown down to be trampled underfoot. -- those acts of caring -- of gratitude and praise to God for Jesus -- I can't help but relate our ministry of prayer shawls to those cloaks. We extravagantly dole out shawls to those who are ill, grieving ... we give them away without counting the cost of wool or the hundreds, thousands of hours of knitting. We give abundantly because Jesus does save us. Our salvation sparks gratitude in us and a desire, a need to give comfort, just a bit of the comfort Jesus gives us, to others.