

## CHRIST ENCOUNTERS: HOSANNA

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Matthew 21:1-17

### Part I

Our reading for today takes place during the festival of Passover. In Jesus' day Passover was one of the three major religious observances of the Jewish people. Jews from all over the known world would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a week of worship and prayer, of celebration and fellowship. For many, this would be their first visit to the big city and the first opportunity to worship in the great temple.

Jesus and his disciples have traveled to Jerusalem from Galilee are just a few of the thousands of people flocking towards the holy city of Zion.

Just outside Jerusalem, at the small village of Bethphage, Jesus sends two of his followers into the village with the cryptic instructions to locate a donkey and a colt. If anyone attempts to stop them, they are to say simply, *The Lord needs them*. Matthew, the writer of this gospel, frames Jesus' action with the words of the prophet Jeremiah who wrote, *Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey*.

The disciples retrieve these animals as instructed. They place their cloaks on the animals as a sort of saddle and Jesus sits on them. Now, the astute among you will have noticed that it says that Jesus rides two animals. And you are correct. What would this look like? I'm not so sure. It seems awkward. I always imagine him like a stunt rider in a wild west show straddling the backs of two stallions galloping around the ring. I'll get back to this in a moment.

Once they've secured the animals, Jesus and his disciples merge with the crowd as it streams toward Jerusalem. Jesus rides the animal (or animals). Joy and excitement propel the crowd in their journey in their festive mood, the crowd takes notice of the man riding the donkey. And they get it. They recognize the image as described by the prophet—the image of a king riding triumphantly into Jerusalem.

Imagine that you are at a 4th of July parade and a figure dressed as George Washington appears. He is walking along behind a John Deere tractor covered in bunting and is in front of a group of eight-year old baton twirlers who keep dropping their batons. As this man passes, the crowd shouts out, "Hey, George," and "Hello Mr. President." They salute and wave American flags. Now, no one would ever consider that this was the real George Washington, but they recognize that what he represents is why they are attending this parade.

It was the same with Jesus approaching Jerusalem. The people knew that he wasn't a king, but they cheered him on anyway. And they placed their own cloaks on the road and laid out branches to create a sort of red carpet—a royal highway for this king. They are making themselves part of this pious tableau.

Although the people did not consider Jesus to be king, at the same time, they were also looking for a king—the king to deliver them from the hand of the Romans, a king who would be the Messiah that they longed for.

Remember the bit about Jesus riding two animals? The other gospels, as they tell about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, only mention one animal. It's a little joke among scholars that Matthew didn't understand the conventions of Hebrew poetry with its commonly used parallelisms. A parallelism is where an idea or image is restated in a slightly different manner. For example, the prophet Amos writes, *But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.* Water and stream are parallel images. So when Matthew tells of two animals, it is not because he failed his poetry class, but rather he is offering us two different understandings of Jesus, Jesus the humble king on a donkey and Jesus the mighty king on horse. Which one do we choose? As they travel, the crowd sings the words of Psalm 118, *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

When we hear the word *hosanna*, we normally understand it be a of acclamation, like “hurray.” But it is more than that. It is a Hebrew word which means “save us.” These verses from Psalm 118 are words that were traditionally sung by pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem. With Jesus present, these words take on a special meaning. Save us Son of David. Save us king. Save us Messiah. *Hosanna to the Son of David.*

## Part II

The events of that day do not end there. Jesus follows the crowd into the city and goes to the temple. His riding into the city has created a stir. People are asking, *Who is this?* Could he really be the king that they are looking for?

The temple was a sprawling complex with multiple courtyards. In one of the outer courtyards merchants would set up tables and booths to sell animals and exchange currencies. Pilgrims coming from far away would not want to transport animals for their temple sacrifices, so they just purchased them on site. If you are flying to grandma's for Easter this week, you're not going to carry a ham on the plane if you can just buy one when you get there. The money changers were there for the same reason. If pilgrims wanted to make an offering to the temple, they would need to exchange their money for the temple's currency.

But Jesus objects to this commerce taking place on the temple grounds. He quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, *My house shall be called a house of prayer.* He

also quotes the prophet Jeremiah saying, *you are making it a den of robbers*. And he goes through pushing over the tables of the merchants who have desecrated God's house.

The temple has a long history with the Jewish people going back to when the Ark of the Covenant was housed in the Tabernacle. King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem and his son Solomon constructed the first temple. Matthew has already established that Jesus is a descendant of David. He has the lineage of a king. The temple represents the people's relationship with God. Jesus' actions lay the foundation for a new way of living with God—a new temple. Jesus is the new king for whom we can sing *save us. Hosanna to the Son of David*.

### Part III

In the temple, after disrupting the commerce taking place, Jesus heals people who are blind and lame. These were likely beggars who stationed themselves at the temple hoping to benefit from the goodwill of the pilgrims. They came to the temple seeking money but instead they found healing and salvation. Through Jesus, they find a new way of living. Through these miraculous healings, Jesus demonstrates the new life of the temple. God is with us and God is watching over us. *Hosanna to the Son of David*.

### Part IV

Next, we encounter the temple officials—the chief priests and scribes. They are angry at what they are witnessing. The chief priests and scribes are essentially local government for Jerusalem, but they hold this power at the pleasure of the Romans.

The festival of Passover is a celebration of the Hebrew's freedom from slavery in Egypt. And the present day people desires nothing more than to be free of Roman rule. The last thing the temple authorities want is for Jesus, or anyone, to incite the people to revolt against Rome. The chief priests don't want a king, and they don't want Jesus performing miracles that make him look like he could be a Messiah.

Amidst this tension in the temple, we can hear the soundtrack of children's voices singing. We can hear them singing the song sung by the pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem, *Hosanna to the Son of David*.

The temple authorities are furious about this. The last thing they want is to hear about a "Son of David" who would bring salvation. They say to Jesus, *Do you hear what these children are saying?* And Jesus quotes the Psalms saying, *Out of the mouths of babes...*

*Hosanna to the Son of David.*

## Part V

On Monday of this week, by lunchtime we had heard that in Nashville, a shooter had entered an elementary school. We would quickly learn that the shooter had killed three adults and three nine-year-old children. There were many acts of heroism and self-sacrifice that day, but none of that will bring back those lives.

Sadly, our nation is enmeshed in an epidemic of gun violence. So far this year (January, February, and March), in the U.S. there have been 130 mass shootings. A mass shooting is an incident in which four or more people are killed or injured. Over the past three years, we have witnessed over 600 mass shootings each year. And the numbers are rising. Not every shooting is a mass shooting. On average, more than 50 people each day are killed by a firearm. Approximately half of these are suicides. In the US, it is estimated that for every 100 residents, there are 120 firearms. Monday was the nineteenth shooting at a school or university campus this year in which at least one person was wounded.

Among children and teens, guns are the leading cause of death. Last year, 34 adults and children died in 46 school shootings.

I could read statistics to you all morning but am not. The single statistic that I want to share with you is this: Today is Palm Sunday and, tragically, it is the first Sunday that six families will not worship with their loved ones who were gunned down. For these families, for the rest of their lives, Palm Sunday will always be a sharp reminder of their loss and pain.

When I was a kid in school, shootings were not so commonplace that we needed active shooter drills. These are foreign to me. But the children today know them too well. And they are tired of them. On Thursday, following Monday's shooting, hundreds, maybe thousands, of students converged on the Tennessee state capitol demanding that lawmakers do something to curb the gun violence that plagues their schools and their lives.

My prayer is that the lawmakers and all of us will listen to the voices of these children as they plead for a new way of life in this world. Let us listen as they sing *Hosanna to the Son of David. Save us.*