It is Palm Sunday. We welcome this Sunday with palm crosses, hymns of “*Ride On, ride on in majesty”, and* proclaiming these words, “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*.” The last two Palm Sunday’s we have done all this by Zoom, which means we are not marching around the parking lot with our long-stemmed palms, instead, we sit on comfy couches in our homes with our eyes staring at a computer screen as we try to reenact a scene meant to disrupt our total view of life. That’s right, Palm Sunday, is designed to poke our soft underbellies with the harshness of life. We may laugh and wave our palms, but embedded inside the story of Palm Sunday, is struggle, fear, distress, disappointment, torture, pain, and death. This last week two mass shootings occurred, giving us one more glimpse on how violence continues to be a part of American culture. Let me read the names of those victims.

##  ATLANTA SHOOTING: Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Xiaojie Tan, 49; Daoyou Feng, 44; Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Soon Chung Park, 74; Suncha Kim, 69; and Yong Ae Yue, 63 and Elcias R. Hernandez-Ortiz, 30, who was critically injured.

 **COLORADO SHOOTING: Denny Stong, 20; Neven Stanisic, 23; Rikki Olds, 25; Tralona Bartkowiak, 49; Eric Talley, 51; Suzanne Fountain, 59; Teri Leiker, 51; Kevin Mahoney, 61; Lynn Murray, 62; and Jodi Waters, 65.**

The people who died in these two mass shootings got up in the morning just like you and I did, never expecting that they would breathe their last breath. I would imagine they might have been having fun, just as the palm bearers were doing as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. People who walked alongside Jesus were laughing and dancing on the streets as they waved their branches of palms shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Positive hope was dancing all around them, and all that hope was laid upon one man, Jesus. What went wrong? Or did anything go wrong?

 To sort this answer out, I wish I were a practicing Jew. Why were the Jews shouting the word Hosanna when the Hebrew meaning of this word means “SAVE NOW!” Save me now, blessed Jesus, who comes in the name of the Lord. Save me from Roman power, save me from Roman oppression, save me from the temple priests who support the Roman empire. Jesus, save me!

 Let me give some background to the Palm Sunday story. First, Jewish people understand the Torah through events, especially during the first century. For most people in the ancient world scrolls of Scripture were not something read, they were something to listen to, because the majority of people were illiterate. Jews flocked into Jerusalem at this time of year for the Passover, where once again, the Exodus story was retold and reenacted. This is a crucial piece of information to hold onto as we continue to try to understand why palms and parades fit right into the existing Passover week.

 The story of Jesus’s entry into the city of Jerusalem is loaded with symbolism, and was organized to make a point. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he asked to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey to bring forward an older Torah story from the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah’s vision of the king entering the city was to declare peace, not war, thus, the reason Jesus rides into Jerusalem riding a donkey. Jesus is performing what we might call a form of street theatre, where he is bringing to life ancient Scripture. The crowd also knows the words from Zechariah, so they happily join the parade, hoping with all their hearts that Jesus truly can deliver them from bondage through peace. But the donkey is only one piece of symbolism.

 The palm branches also carry a weight of discovery. The palm branches are a symbol of an ancient practice by the Jews called the festival of Succoth, or the Jewish festival of booths. During the festival of the booths temporary outdoor shelters would be made to celebrate the 7 days of God providing freedom from the Egyptians. God says to Moses, “*You shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, leafy trees and willows of the brook and you shall rejoice before the Lord for 7 days. You shall live in booths for 7 days, booths are temporary shelters made up of leaf trees, so that generations in the future will know that I the Lord brought them into freedom*.” These are words taken right out of the book of Exodus.

 Are you beginning to get a glimpse on how Jesus has become a director of a street scene meant to showcase how God sees people living in his Kingdom? God’s Kingdom is one of peace, where the lamb will lie down next to the lion. Jesus is showing that Scripture, the Torah, is something to be fulfilled, bringing forth ancient behavior and patterns to bring the ancient story alive.

 The atmosphere of joy and excitement, and there was plenty of that demonstrated on this day, is the hope that Jesus might actually be the person to bring about freedom, to take people out of bondage. This excitement explains the hope and rippling joy permeating our Gospel text this morning; This may also explain why the happy crowd turns on Jesus so soon when they discover gaining freedom will not happen.

 If you had been a person walking in this parade produced by Jesus, and expected Jesus to perform an outlandish miracle to provide freedom from Roman oppression, wouldn’t you be confused also. And, that is the ongoing paradox those early followers faced on what we call Palm Sunday. Jesus seems to have failed in his mission. The truth is, we, as followers of Jesus face the same confusion of those early followers, and may even ask the same questions. How does peace overcome violent power? If we look at the week following Palm Sunday, the story of Jesus is bleak. Jesus is whipped. Jesus is ridiculed. Jesus dies a horrible and painful death.

We, too, must emotionally wrestle with the Palm Sunday text. What are we waiting for? What are we hoping for? Does peace carry any weight in our American culture? What would we be asking Jesus to save us from? Allow me to take you back to last week. Last week Jesus told the story of a grain of wheat to show how Jesus, himself, was to be glorified. For John, Jesus doesn’t come merely to die. Jesus doesn’t come just to be resurrected. In the Gospel of John, for Jesus to be glorified, means to make God seeable, not in his physical sense, but in the shape of his love. Jesus comes to die, to rise, and to ascend, such that the spirit will inspire a new community for justice, kindness and humility. That for John is the big climax of the gospel story. For Palm Sunday, we are to grab onto the climax in John’s story, that love is stronger than violence.

 We are to live a life shaped by Jesus. We are to study the life of Jesus. And we are to grasp holy presence rather than living in fear that violence will take over. Can violence and evil reign for a season? Yes, history demonstrates how evil can rule the day, but we are to remain steadfast in our belief that the Kingdom Jesus talked about is the way to live.

 Can we shout these words, “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord*,” and really expect Jesus to save us. Perhaps, we can think of being saved this way. Can you save us Jesus from becoming violent? Can you save us Jesus from feeling helpless in a violent culture that seems to rule, yet, if we look around to our neighbors’ I see love being demonstrated? Jesus, save us from our fear. Jesus, help us become more like you. Amen.