

## Opening Hymn # 505 Sweet Hour of Prayer

### Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2saying to them,

“Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

4This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

5“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

6The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

8A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

9The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

10When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

## “The Busy Donkey”

When I chose the text and the title for Palm Sunday, I wanted to make my sermon light and joyful. Shiloh UCC, this is our first Palm Sunday together! So I wanted to share a joke with you about a funny donkey, because it's good to celebrate and laugh. We would have had an egg hunt at the church today, which would have made our kids laugh and eat too much candy...

However, this Palm Sunday is different than any other Palm Sunday I have ever had. It's scarier and more serious than other years. We are isolated and separated, even lonely a bit, as we sit in our homes hoping that we won't get the virus.

However, Palm Sunday is still Palm Sunday. Even with its serious undertones, we still need to rejoice with the crowds who were celebrating with Jesus. So you know what? I will still share with you my silly donkey joke. Here it goes:

*A policeman stops a speeding car on the highway. When he looks through the window, he sees a man sitting with a donkey in the front seat.*

*"What are you doing with that donkey? You should take it to the zoo."*

*The man agrees. The following week, the same policeman sees the man and the donkey in the front seat again, but this time both of them are wearing sunglasses and flip flops. The policeman pulls him over again.*

*"I thought I told you to take that donkey to the zoo!"*

*The man replies,*

*"I did.... We had such a good time... now we are going to the beach!"<sup>1</sup>*

I know it's an old joke, but I think it's the best donkey joke ever! And today, we will be talking about busy donkeys. Not Shrek's Donkey, or the donkey in Winnie the Pooh, but donkeys from the Bible.

In our story, we hear about two busy donkeys, that carry the most humble king, Jesus, into Jerusalem. The metaphor of the humble king riding on a donkey, actually comes from the Old Testament, Zechariah 9:9 which reads:

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<sup>1</sup> source: <http://www.jokes4us.com/animaljokes/donkeyjokes.html>

**“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!  
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and victorious,  
lowly and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”**

As cute as donkeys are, they are not the focus of the Zechariah text. It mainly focuses on the humble king, riding into the city. The king, as Zechariah prophesizes, will not ride on a war horse, but on a young donkey. Also, the original text does not talk about two animals. It is simply parallelism, which is characteristic of Hebrew poetry. It is a type of poetic repetition.

The Gospel of Matthew, the most Jewish gospel, chooses to take the short poem from Zechariah so literally, that in today's text Jesus seems to ride on two donkeys. As spectacular as that would have been, most scholars agree that this wasn't the case. The central message of our text focuses on the humble Messiah, the gentle king, who rides on a simple animal, a donkey, instead of a proud horse, the sign of royalty. But enough of donkeys...

The Palm Sunday story is exciting. It's full of hidden messages. One of them is the palm branches that the people spread on the road in front of Jesus. In the first century, Palm branches were a sign of Jewish nationalism. A few hundred years before Jesus was born, a Jewish rebel army, the Maccabees took control of Judea.

The Maccabees re-established Jewish religion and reduced the influence of Hellenism. They strengthened the power of local synagogues and refused to worship Greek Gods. The leaves of the Palm tree symbolized their victory and triumph. Greek speaking people in Judea at that time would have remembered that historical event.

By raising Palm leaves instead of traditional Roman laurel wreaths, the crowd was expressing their yearning for the sovereignty of Israel. On that first Palm Sunday when the palm leaves and clothes covered the road before Jesus and his donkeys, the crowds felt like the time was ripe for change. They wanted freedom from Rome and its Caesar.

So they joined the parade, and happily shouted **“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”**

The original words for this acclamation of joy come from Psalm 118 :25-26), which was sung during Passover. The word Hosanna (הושיע־נא Hoshianna) was originally a prayer: "Save us, help us, or rescue us." However, by the time of Jesus, the language had changed. Hosanna also meant a greeting, praise, or joyful acclamation.

Today, I would like to focus on the original meaning of the word Hosanna, because we need Jesus to walk into our lives and “save us, help us and rescue us.” Today when we can’t even enjoy the beauty of real palm leaves, when we can’t touch or hug other people in our pews to wish them peace, we need God’s special intervention to save us from this sad situation.

I don’t know how this rescue mission from God will arrive, but I know it’s coming. It may come humbly and slowly, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. ...

Even though we are isolated in our homes, we can still celebrate. We are still one with each other, and in spirit we are holding each other’s hands. We at Shiloh UCC are still a strong congregation, even if we can’t give each other a hug in our pews.

Our Messiah, Jesus Christ is not only the young rabbi who lead a simple parade into Jerusalem and died on Good Friday. Our Messiah is also a glorious and resurrected king whose name makes knees bend “in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” (Philippians 2:10)

When the people of Jerusalem shouted "Hosanna!," they asked for help. They needed someone who could save them, rescue them from slavery, poverty, and political oppression. They needed faith. They needed hope. They needed help from above. Somewhere deep down, the crowds knew they needed divine intervention: they needed Jesus.

Today, we need Jesus, too. We need Jesus because his triumphant entry into Jerusalem is like God entering our hearts. Of course, we are not talking about a physical entrance. We are talking about a spiritual experience. Not necessarily a one time event, but a holy moment when we realize, life is more than this physical existence. Life is more than isolation, anxiety, and fear.

Our God listens to our call. Our God listens to our prayers. Today when we shout “hosanna” - and you should shout it in your homes - remember that it means: "help me, save me, rescue me, God."

We worry about our children and families. We worry about our own lives. We worry about our healthcare workers and first responders. We worry when we watch the news on TV. ...

But in this moment help is on the way. God is ready to save us. When we need it the most, God’s Holy Spirit gives us peace, joy, and inner harmony. When we least expect it, miracles happen. People who haven’t talked to one another for years, reach out and check on each other. Congregations wake up and pray. Churches remember their elderly and sick. As we are going through the valley of the shadow of death and struggle with a deadly outbreak, at the same time we are coming together, like the muscles and sinews in Ezekiel’s vision, to form the body of Christ.

The body of Christ is strong and alive. It’s not on Youtube or Facebook or on our website. It’s in our homes right now. It’s in you and in me. Christ is working through you and I. You are not donkeys carrying Jesus to someone; you are holy children of God, Christ’s hands and feet, praying, calling, and loving others.

This Palm Sunday is different than others before. It’s more serious, because the times are difficult. But today we are also strong in Christ. Our faith has some extra time to bathe in God’s holy presence. Therefore this Palm Sunday we are hopeful, despite what we hear and see on TV.

With Jesus in our hearts we are brave. With Jesus in our hearts we can face anything, because our help comes from the God who created heaven and earth. Our bodies, minds and spirits are in good hands.

So today, receive Jesus into the busy city of your life. Let the humble king rule and bring peace. In this moment, shout with me in your quiet homes together with your families:

**“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” Amen.**

## **Pastoral Prayer**

Hosanna! Help us, save us, Loving God. Come into our hearts, and lead us. Lead us to that joy you promise to all who love you. Despite our scary world, today we celebrate. We celebrate you with praises from our heart and soul. Thank you for your love and presence.

Jesus, we also thank you for being humble and choosing a donkey to enter Jerusalem. Help us to learn from you. Help us to be humble and kind. Inspire us to bring your love and forgiveness into our world. This Palm Sunday we praise you and ask you to bless our lives. Bless our families with good health, love, and peace. Stay with us even when we struggle.

At this time we intercede for everyone who needs your special attention. We pray for everyone affected by the coronavirus outbreak. We pray for the sick, for those who are mourning, and for all the lonely people at home.

We pray for the families who have lost loved ones, and for those who have been exposed to the virus and are battling for their lives. At this time of global crisis, Lord, we pray.

Loving God, you have blessed our nation with people who selflessly serve others. Americans are risking their lives to help their neighbor. We thank you for the labor of men and women in the armed forces, for the hard work of the police, fire fighters, doctors, and nurses. We pray for everyone who is working in healthcare on the front lines in our struggle against this deadly disease. We pray for all who work for the common good. With confidence and assurance, we pray these things in the powerful name of Jesus.

Amen.

**Closing Hymn #52 There Is a Name I Love to Hear (O How I Love Jesus)**