

## **What Are You Doing?**

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

March 24, 2024 –Palm Sunday

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### *Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29*

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.

The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

### *Mark 11:1-11*

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

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What are you doing?

That is often not a question you hear as a casual curiosity but more likely said in a tone of “I-caught-you-with-your-hand-in-the-cookie-jar.” We feel startled, caught off guard, and even

defensive. Like the child rolling in the grass while wearing the school pictures outfit, or the boss seeing a video game being played instead of the report being written, or the smoker desperately trying to quit but who is seen sneaking a cigarette, ‘what are you doing?’ is an indictment, an accusation, of wrongdoing.

What are you doing?

That is the kind of question Jesus had heard throughout his life. What are you doing healing on the Sabbath? What are you doing telling us to love our enemies? What are you doing welcoming outcasts and women and children? What are you doing eating with tax collectors and other sinners? What are you doing challenging the wisdom and the leadership of the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the scribes? What are you doing claiming to be the Son of God? What are you doing saying you can rebuild the temple in three days? What are you doing Jesus of Nazareth? Don’t you know a prophet has no honor in his hometown?

Now, not far from Jerusalem, Jesus has sent two of his disciples ahead to the next village with a very specific task. “Immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it.” He even gave specific instructions if anyone questioned their actions. Sure enough, just as they found and began to untie the young donkey, some bystanders stepped in.

“What are you doing, untying the colt?” Perhaps they were the ones who had arranged for the donkey to be there waiting, and their concern was a confirmation of the disciples. Perhaps the bystanders assumed the disciples were thieves planning to just walk away with the donkey. Perhaps they themselves had other plans for the donkey and they were interrupted. Whatever reason for their questioning, the bystanders let the colt be untied and brought to Jesus.

On Palm Sunday we hear and get caught up the familiar story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the donkey, and the Hosanna cheers and the cloaks on the road, and we wave the parade palms as our faith ancestors did so long ago. We know the story that each of the gospel writers tell almost entirely the same way<sup>i</sup>. We know it—and what is coming—so well that we can lose sight of the details, of the symbols, and the fact that the gospel writers spend more time telling of the preparations than they tell of the parade itself.

With that in mind, I invite us to linger here with the young donkey who is tied up, a donkey who has never been ridden, an animal that is a biblical symbol of humility, suffering, service and peace. The donkey that has no idea that Jesus has a special purpose for it, and that Jesus needs to have it untied and brought to him.

This seemingly simple start to the festal parade actually bears great significance. This was not a hastily arranged event, not a spontaneous celebration, to welcome the one who was expected to overthrow Roman rule and oppression. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on the back of colt was a counter-procession in stark contrast with another procession coming into the other side of the city—the arrival on grand horseback with full military might and with pomp and circumstance for Pontious Pilate, the governor of Judea, and under the watchful eye of King Herod. His parade was a show of force to remind the people of Jerusalem that Rome was in charge.

The yearly Passover celebration made the authorities nervous. They worried that when the people gathered together to remember how they were liberated in Egypt, they would get ideas about freedom and start a rebellion against Rome. In general, they considered it dangerous to have so many members of an oppressed group in one place. They were afraid that there might be a riot. The authorities were prepared to stop it even before it could begin. The Jewish people were never to forget that they were tied to Roman rule.

The young donkey that Jesus had his disciples untie so that he could arrive as a peaceful, humble servant into Jerusalem was a satire of Pontious Pilate's parade and policies.

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

What was Jesus doing?

He was coming to untie the poor, overtaxed and oppressed racial minority who came out to see this Jewish miracle-worker rabbi. He was coming to answer their calls for help—Hosanna—save us. He was coming to untie the people—then and now— from burden and bondage.

In the days that follow these parades we know the story will become dramatically different and brutal, but now, in this moment, in the shadow of the warhorse carrying Pontious Pilate, Jesus rides a humble, peaceful donkey. He is the liberator, the redeemer, although not as the people expected, nor accepted.

What was Jesus doing?

Jesus was coming to untie all that binds up God's people. Not just the oppression of Roman rule, but all that oppresses and limits and dehumanizes.

As we walk alongside Jesus riding in on the colt today and we wave our palms and we too shout Hosanna, what are we asking Jesus to save us from? What are we asking Jesus to unbind and untie us from? What are we asking Jesus to be doing?

We all have things that tie us down, so perhaps our hosanna comes straight from the heart of our own needs today. It might be that you are bound by anxiety, guilt, stress, grief, debt, concern or regret. It might be that you cry hosanna for someone you love who is bound by illness, dependence, an unhealthy relationship, risky life choices or a selfish attitude. Together we shout hosanna for the ways our world is tied to greed and materialism over sharing and equity, to xenophobia over welcome, to development over conservation.

What are you doing? We are welcoming the One who liberates and redeems, whose steadfast love endures forever, who unties what is burdened and in bondage. Hosanna. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mt 21:1-11, Mk 11:1-11, Lk 19: 28-44, Jn 12:12-19