

Hosanna and Heartache (message Rev. Alissia Thompson)
(Matthew 21:1-11, Palm Sunday 2023)

This has been a really hard week. For months now, Katie and Michelle Kopp have been encouraging me to listen to this podcast - I'm not a big podcaster, so while it sounded amazing, I admit that I didn't jump at it - it's called 'The Anthropocene Reviewed.' So when I saw them both last week, they asked if I had listened yet - insert awkward fumbling - I admitted that I had not. So Katie, very persistently, sent me the link to an episode. And on Tuesday, I finally listened.

The title of the episode was 'Googling Strangers and Kentucky Bluegrass.' Now I trust in Katie and Michelle's taste, so when they said that the podcast was perhaps one of the best-curated ones they'd heard, I was inclined to believe them. They were right. Not a word wasted, not an inflection missed - it was as if I was listening to NPR in podcast form. The first part was fascinating enough - the podcaster, John Green, is a Kenyon College grad and author of *The Fault in Our Stars*, among others - he discussed the American obsession with lawn care and Kentucky bluegrass - not the music, but the actual greenery itself. He talked about how much drinking water gets wasted when we finick over our yards and the impact of gasoline usage in mowers on the environment - I appreciated his eco-bent and learning about the historical privilege associated with a well-manicured lawn. That said, I still wasn't *quite* sure why Katie and Michelle were so adamant that I listen to this particular episode. And then John moved into the practice of Googling Strangers...

You see, John worked a stint as a chaplain in a children's hospital. He was in seminary at one point - UChicago, I came to learn - both contexts with which I am intimately familiar. He told the story of the case that 'broke' him - a level-one trauma, a child, a burn patient - who had been rushed into the ER after suffering severe, agonizing, life-threatening injuries. He recalled the wailing and the screams, the attending dry heaving in a trash can in the back, and the parents crumpling in abject despair. The child would be admitted in critical condition, and John would leave his post before he ever learned of the child's disposition. Soon thereafter, he dropped out of Divinity School.

Now you might be asking yourself, 'Why would you tell such an awful story, Alissia, on a Palm Sunday when we are supposed to be rejoicing in the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem?' A fair question. After all, that's what this text is all about today, right? Jesus' humble yet defiant arrival on a donkey in what amounted to a protest against the ruling powers and principalities? In fact, this is *exactly* the message I preached last year: Palm Sunday as one big protest. ***But there is a flip side to this coin, and not one many churches talk about on this Sunday: and that is the Passion.*** Because on this Sunday, us preachers are given a choice: ***do we preach the triumphant Palms or the despairing Passion narrative?*** There are two different textual options. And it's set up this way because not every church holds a Maundy Thursday or Good Friday service - it allows preachers the flexibility to preach the crucifixion instead of going from waving, happy palms to the profundity of the resurrection. And I think this latitude is really important because societally we tend to do so poorly with grief and death. And this is why folks like Karoline Lewis, a biblical professor, advocate for ***holding Hosanna and Heartache*** in tension on this Sunday, recognizing that life simply isn't that tidy. We don't get to just skirt around and ignore the tragic, painful, unjust ways of the world, and it's not healthy for us to repress our hopelessness or rage or despair. And we don't get to put them in neat little boxes with glittery bows to say, 'hey, today I think I'll unwrap happiness' while 'tomorrow, I guess I'll be

sad.' It isn't an either/or proposition, no matter how much we'd like to fool ourselves into believing it is. It **all** coexists, it **all** gets mixed up, it's **messy** - feelings are messy. And yet we live in this world that *consistently* wants to deal in dualities alone, that forces binaries and creates arbitrary categories to stuff people, feelings, and events into - and that's just not of God. **God is an arbiter of possibilities.**

What we're reading today is the fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. He will enter the city of a humble donkey, he will study war no more, he will usher in a reign of peace from nation to nation - *Hosanna!* Do you know what *hosanna* means? In the Hebrew, *hosanna* means **save now, or Help!** Jesus enters, and this is what the people are yelling: SAVE US! HELP US! The text says the city is in turmoil as Jesus rides in - *Hosanna!* They wave their branches and place their cloaks on the road in deference to this unassuming savior.

Doesn't this text feel familiar today? Doesn't it feel a little too real or relatable? How many of us feel like *screaming out* Hosanna right now - **HELP US!!!!** More children gunned down at their school, more innocent lives lost - **SAVE US!!!!** The city - a nation - in turmoil - **HOSANNA!!!!** The reintroduction of firing squads as a means of the death penalty - the denial of gender-affirming healthcare - the bitterness and contempt of political rhetoric...

I have this image, this unshakeable image, of Jesus riding in on that donkey, and instead of palms waving they're **guns** spraying bullets haphazardly into the air...

John Green said in that podcast episode that he was *really* adept at Googling strangers. And for some reason, for *years*, despite this skill he *refused* to look up that child burn victim. He had always assumed, given the severity of the case and the doctor's prognosis, the child had died. And then one day, for whatever reason, John Googled him.

The child had lived. He was alive.

Hosanna and Heartache.

And as I was writing this sermon, my neighbor's tree across the way was starting to bud this gorgeous red. The sun was shining, my dogs were napping comfortably, and I was drying my tears. Because I see, I see, the truth of *Hosanna and Heartache* all around me. And I see, *I feel*, the need for a more expansive view on life, a both/and view, a YES, AND view, a view that can hold the desperation alongside of the delight. I see, and feel, a deep need for courage, and compassion, and urgency, and imagination, and risk in this moment in our history. Because no child, or parent, or educator, should have to worry about whether or not their school will be next. No human person should be denied the right to flourish. Fighting fire with fire is foolish, and no bulletproof glass or kevlar will protect us from the reality that our nation is in a deep state of heartache and is crying out *Hosanna*. And for today, this text reminds me of the need for humility and the need to continually turn toward God with both my *Hosanna* and my *Heartache*, to stay on that narrow path of peace, to remember that the wicked will not get the last word, to pray, to be righteous and to do good, to remember that Jesus is still alive - *he is alive*.

When John finally looked up that kiddo, the child had turned 18 years old. He was *thriving*. *Alive*. *He was alive*. Beloved, we are *alive* - and that means *Hosanna and Heartache*. So we walk together, *alive*, marching onward toward the cross, knowing what is to come and the cost to bear, yet steadfastly refusing to let go of hope.

After all, that kid - *he lived*. Amen.