

## **“Hosanna! The Difficulty of Salvation”**

*Reading: Psalm 20; Luke 8:26-39*

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We have a little over a month before Ash Wednesday, when we enter into the season of Lent and begin our journey toward the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In the meantime, we've calmed down a bit and settled in after the Christmas and New Year seasons, and in the Christian calendar, this time is focused on growing and deepening our walk with Christ. We're going to be doing that over these next few weeks by telling stories of salvation. What are some ways God has saved people throughout history? What does it mean to be saved? We need to tell one another these stories about a God who saves for a couple of critical reasons: first, because we need to be reminded of what He's done so that we can remember the hope we have in Him, but beyond that, we need to remember His power to save because these stories shape us and motivate us. If God can save the people in these stories, then He can save you, He can save your friends, He can save your loved ones, He can save your enemies, He can save people we haven't even met yet, He can save the worst sinners, and He can save the unseen, abandoned lost ones.

In my preaching I like to spend a lot of time telling the story of what God has done and how He makes us who we are as the church, because I think the church is such a beautiful thing and it has such powerful promise. But it's also good and necessary from time to time to simply sit and marvel at what God is capable of doing. And as we tell these stories of salvation, the implied question for us is this: what are the possibilities of salvation that we haven't even dreamed of yet? If we invite Jesus Christ to do it, and we make ourselves available to join in His work, who might He save? What might He do that will leave us picking up our jaws off the floor? What prayers are we praying too small? What relationships are we ignoring or writing off as too difficult or unimportant for God to work for salvation? The more stories of salvation we tell, the more we should be inspired to pray and act boldly and lovingly for those who are in need of salvation. And so our cry in this season is, “Hosanna!” The ancient cry of God's people in Aramaic which means, “Save us!”

So we begin our series of stories with a classic tale from the gospels of Jesus saving a person possessed by demons. There are lots of stories like this one, and yet like all stories of salvation it is its own unique story about the power of God. And as we tell this story, it tells us a lot not only about the ability of Jesus to save a man's life, it also illustrates an awful lot about the nature of salvation. And so as unique as this story is, it is also a story that has been repeated countless times and may even be repeated today as we cry out for salvation.

The story really begins with a boat ride. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story, and in each one, it kind of comes out of nowhere. Jesus is traveling along and teaching crowds of people in the region of Galilee, and one day, out of the blue from our perspective, He decides to get in a boat and sail across the lake. It's worth noting that apparently He was leaving behind crowds of people to do this; we'll come back to that in a moment. He loads up His disciples and heads across the lake, and while they're sailing, a sudden and violent storm blows up and threatens to sink their boat. The disciples panic, understandably, but Jesus gets up and rebukes the wind and the waves and the sea becomes still. Everyone is rightly amazed; “Who is this,” they ask, “even the wind and the waves obey Him!” After their brush with death, they get to the other side of the lake, cast out the demons from this possessed man, get back in the boat, and head back across the lake.

I don't know what all the disciples were thinking, but if I had been there that day on the ride back across the lake, I might have asked Jesus whether the trip was really worth it. I mean, yes, it's great that the demon-possessed man is now demon-free, and calming the storm would be pretty cool to watch, but was this one guy worth the time and energy, not to mention the risk of death, when there were crowds of people back where we came from? And here we catch a glimpse of one of the mysteries of the kingdom of God: in God's economy, that one person bound by darkness on the far side of the sea *is* worth the risk and the effort. Salvation coming to one man is worth all that trouble for all those people. Yes, this Shepherd will leave the ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold to go out in search of one measly little sheep that was dumb enough to get itself lost. This kingdom is more concerned with salvation than it is with popularity. Jesus embodies the time-consuming, difficult, risky, costly, deliberate, incarnational demands of seeking the lost. But for all of that, the trip is worth it. He cleared His schedule that day for that one man in trouble.

When they get to where they're going, they find themselves in the middle of a mess. Maybe they're still wringing themselves out after that storm, I don't know, but they no sooner set foot on the shore than they encounter a sight straight out of a horror movie: a man tormented by demons to the point of living in a graveyard, so violent that not even chains can hold him. Sometimes the gospel writers refer to demons as "unclean" or "impure spirits," underlining the fact that these beings are cut off from God because of their rebellion against Him and are therefore ceremonially unclean; they defile anything and anyone they come in contact with. On top of that, this scene takes place in a graveyard, among the tombs of the dead, and the Jews had pretty strict rules about coming into contact with the dead. Touching a dead body was taboo; this is a place of spiritual disease. It's also a predominantly Gentile area: Jesus has not only crossed the lake, He's crossed over to the wrong side of the tracks, and observant Jews, especially if they want to be a good rabbi, generally didn't mix with Gentiles if they could avoid it. To add to it all, there's a huge herd of pigs nearby, an animal that is, again, ceremonially unclean to Jews; they're taboo.

This man is found in a thoroughly unclean, unholy place among unclean, unholy things and people. His bondage has driven him there. He will never go to church of his own accord. A postcard sent through the mail to invite him to a Christmas Eve service will never find him. Jesus has to go out looking for him, and in so doing, He surely exposes Himself to the ire of the gossip mill: "Did you hear where that new rabbi went the other day?" But this man is worth it, because he's worth saving.

He's worth saving because, wreck though he is, he was created to be a child of God, the King of the universe, and he has now fallen into bondage under the Prince of Lies. Jesus has come to lay claim to His kingdom, and He is marching forward to challenge the gates of the dominion of darkness. Jesus finds a man whose soul is a battlefield, and his life bears the scars. The man is broken, tormented, desperate, and dangerous, but salvation is not out of the question even for him. Other people have undoubtedly tried: he apparently carries the evidence of the broken chains they used in their attempts to restrain his demons, but all their efforts were powerless in the face of such darkness. But there is still hope of salvation, or Jesus wouldn't have come.

Salvation for this man means the breaking of those chains of darkness, setting him free from these controlling, defiling, destructive spirits, and giving him a new life of health and hope. It seems impossible against such odds; he has so many demons that their name is Legion. Everyone else has

given up hope for him. But the chains of darkness can be broken by the one who is the Light of the World. This man can be saved by Jesus Christ.

It's not easy, and it's not safe, and it's not cheap. It has already required a risky and inconvenient journey across the lake. It requires a confrontation of the evil dwelling in this man and defiling his life. Jesus demands that the demons possessing this man give Him their name, and if you follow the allegory, often our sins need to be named in order for their chains to start weakening. We cannot be saved from demons if we refuse to accept that there are demons binding us. We cannot be saved from addiction or lust or greed or pride or any other "demon" until we're willing to confess that it's a problem and we need to be saved from it. Salvation might involve a lot more; it might involve prayer or counseling or medication or any number of other things, but it doesn't have a chance of happening until those demons are at least named. God begins the work of salvation by us crying out our need for salvation. Lord, I'm caught in sin! Lord, I'm in trouble! Lord, I'm bound by the chains of the devil! Hosanna! Save me! That's when amazing things begin to happen.

But this is hardly the end of the difficulty of this man's salvation. It's a very odd twist to the story; there's nothing else quite like it in the Bible. The demons are worried about Jesus sending them into the Abyss; this is perhaps a place of imprisonment for rebellious spirits. Jesus therefore sends them into a herd of pigs, which then rush down into the lake and are drowned. It's an odd episode that we don't completely understand, but one of the effects is that the pig herders are afraid of Jesus to the point of asking Him to leave; this formerly demon-possessed man's salvation just cost them a lot of money. This is another one of those parts of this story that often repeat in stories of salvation: there's an economic cost to a transformed life. Giving up a life of sin sometimes costs you. Breaking demons' chains sometimes costs you. Sometimes other people make money off of your sin, and so confronting a sin means confronting a very profitable economic structure. People don't always react reasonably when you challenge their profits, in case you hadn't noticed. That's part of sin's snare.

But the cost is worth it. The payoff of this man's salvation is a miraculous thing: he puts on clothes, sits at Jesus' feet, and is in his right mind. He has been made whole. A man has been rescued from unimaginable torment. Salvation is difficult, yes, and often it's even more difficult that it was for this man, but the results are nothing short of miraculous, and it naturally leads to the two things we see this man doing: he wants to follow Jesus, and he goes out and tells other people how much God has done for him. He becomes a disciple, and he becomes a witness. He responds in faith, and he responds in mission. The natural result of salvation is sharing the hope of salvation with those who still need salvation. We cry out "Hosanna!" together in chorus.

Yet we must remember that the miracle of salvation is that it could not be accomplished by the one who needed it. He needed salvation because he was helpless. Even his community was helpless; they had tried their best to at least restrain him, but their chains weren't strong enough for his demons. We cry out "Hosanna! Save us!" because we try and we try and we try to save ourselves, and sometimes we even make some progress, but always we will find ourselves back in bondage to sin in one way or another. We need a savior.

Today our cry is simple: "Hosanna! Lord, save us!" We come together today in all sorts of situations, but all in need. We live in the shadow of death, or the shadow of illness, or the shadow of sin, or the shadow of broken relationships, or the shadow of addiction, and we need Jesus Christ to

save us. We live in a world filled with people in desperate need of salvation, and we need to pray for their salvation. This is our call today: join together in a chorus of hosannas for ourselves, our church, and our world.



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