

## **Engage!**

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Many of you know that although I was raised Presbyterian, I was not raised in your *typical Presbyterian Church*. The rich church up the hill was a *typical Presbyterian Church*, full of the frozen. It was very still in that church when the preacher delivered the sermon...no one moved...at all. In fact people fell asleep there during the message, and that was the only time anyone moved...a head would fall forward in front of me...a person to my right would jerkily spasm in a fitful dream. The faithful in that church had doors on the pews too, with their names on them if they had contributed a certain amount. They locked from the inside to keep strangers out and the pews were padded with red velvet cushions.

Although many of the seminary Professors went to this church my father , who was also a professor there, preferred the much poorer church in the less affluent section of town; it was and still is called Witherspoon Presbyterian Church (after John Witherspoon one of the early leaders in the Presbyterian Church) – white clapboard building with a tiny balcony where I sat next to my father each Sunday wedged into the corner...on a very hard thin wooden pew so pressed up against the railing, that when we stood to sing I often was afraid I would fall over onto the heads of the people below. It was often packed, and very hot in the summer up there, filled with New Jersey humidity and folded paper fans flying... Anyway, despite the summer

heat... you couldn't fall asleep in that church. No...this church rocked, with gospel music and a choir that swayed and clapped. During the sermon, no one could sleep because the congregation would respond to whatever the preacher was saying. If the preacher said something good...people would nod, and say Thank you Jesus! Thank you Jesus! Praise the Lord! Praise God! Uh huh! Yes Lord! God is good!! And as the sermon would go on, if the pastor got off track or became a little long winded ... the comments would change from Thank you Jesus...to... "Help him Jesus! Help him Jesus! Lord have mercy! Give us grace...Lord its been a long long time" But the cool thing about this church was that **the people were ENGAGED**...they were right there...blessing the Lord and becoming a part of what God was doing in that hour... No one slept through a sermon..

The day that Jesus takes his journey into Jerusalem, on what we commemorate as Palm Sunday (the week before his death) there is a level of engagement from the people that I don't get a sense of anywhere else in scripture, during the earthly ministry of Christ. It's like for just a few minutes as Jesus enters Jerusalem people are doing what they are meant to do – praising him, looking at him expectantly, asking him to save them. (IMAGE OF THIS?) Finally there is acknowledgment... finally there is a sense of celebration and awe from the people. It doesn't last long... but right here...as Jesus enters the city...people get it right.

This city was filled with pilgrims, visitors, and travelers who had come from many areas to share in the feast of Passover. Secular census records indicate there were at least

2,500,000 people in Jerusalem on that day. Can you imagine the press of the crowd...the anticipation...

The people are excited...they are expecting great things from this prophet from Nazareth...They are saying **HOSANNA!** (say it together) This means "**SAVE NOW!**" (say it together)

If you google the words SAVE NOW do you know what you get? (IMAGE) You get a host of advertisements for special savings accounts and banking privileges – a list of reasons why saving money is a good idea. In case anyone is confused, that is NOT what is going on here.

The word Hosanna has nothing to do with saving money; rather the people are looking for a prophet or a King to save them from the oppression of the Romans. The people have been under Roman rule, most of them living below the poverty line of the time, burdened by taxes and bowed down under the weight of submission to a government that at times could be ruthless; and they want Jesus to release them from this...overthrow the government...and bring them out.

Now, think about who must have been in that shouting crowd - people for whom Jesus had restored sight, straightened limbs, given them back clear sane reasoning, -healed their bodies in all kinds of ways; there might have even been one named Lazarus in the crowd,

whose life had been restored from the grave. There was excitement and expectation and joy in the air.

Many Palm Sunday sermons emphasize the negative truth - that this is a crowd that is fickle and changing. That these people who are crying out "Hosanna" by the end of the week will be crying out "Crucify Him!" And this is true.

And Jesus knew that...as much as Jesus knows right now that we gather here on Sunday morning praising him, glorifying him ...but during the week we aren't probably going to manage to stay in that space of joy and praise; love and compassion; prayer and discernment; we will do things this week that squelch his presence...we will sin..we will fall short...we will betray him, and not measure up....but that doesn't mean that right now, as you praise him, as you come to him in prayer, as you engage with him with an honest heart before God...he is not present and grateful for your praises and your prayers and your engagement with him.

As much as Jesus entered the city that day and came to the people...so he comes to you today and asks for your Hosannas....

The anticipation and enthusiasm of this crowd, the joy that they have in his coming shows us that *at least for this moment* they have their hearts and voices focused on him...in the right place, saying the right thing, because **Jesus is ...the only one who can save**. Jesus desires that they cry out the truth - that they respond to his presence in their midst...that they engage and witness to the reality of

who he is...**"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."** (I think Jesus is thinking) *Yes thank you!! Finally for once you've got it straight...I will save...and I do come in the name of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel.*

Let's take a look at the religious leaders.

What do they say to the people and to the children as they are crying out Hosanna?

They say **"BE QUIET! Jesus...tell the people to be quiet. Tell the children to be quiet.** In other words...we don't believe in you. You aren't the Savior. This is all nonsense. Tell the people to disengage...to fall asleep to your presence...to stop creating a scene.

And Jesus says this marvelous thing, that emphasizes again that **he desires our Hosannas.** He says..."if the people were quiet – with their praises, with their desire to be delivered, with their longings for freedom.... if they disengaged from celebrating my presence and calling out to me for help...the very stones would cry out!" *All of creation knows who I am (Jesus is essentially saying) .... Even the most inanimate object...a stone...even a stone...would come to life and state this truth...if these people did not cry out their longings, their hopes, their dreams, their praises... ..* the words "Save me now" O Lord...is exactly the words Jesus wants to hear. Cause he's in the saving business...he's the only one who can save...

There's something about God's people being engaged, being passionate, vocal, in living relationship with their Creator, looking forward to what the Lord will do next

in their lives, that delights God's heart...So there's one word I want you to remember from this meditation and that is the word **ENGAGE**

**Engage with God this Holy Week** from your heart. Don't just let this next week happen and go through the motions. Don't be a silent spectator...coming to church is not meant to be entertainment....where you are a passive recipient. Church is an invitation to engage...to respond...to live out your faith with passion and expectation.

Sign up for the prayer vigil - the sign up is right out there in the lobby

There will be a prayer labyrinth you can walk through next to the prayer room with stations and exercises to bring more meaning to the cross. There's a Maundy

Thursday, and a Good Friday service before we even get to Easter. Engage! Another

way you can engage with God in this Holy week is to **take the word Hosanna home with you today**... and use it boldly; cry out to God honestly...

**SAVE ME NOW.** You can even see yourself as part of that crowd, ... reaching out with palm branches toward Christ...eager, expectant, and longing to be free.

And ask the Lord to free *you* from anything that is weighing *you* down during this week, burdening *you*; .and ask him to resurrect you to his purpose, his plan and his joy in your life...

You know sometimes we can get disillusioned with God cause maybe we shout Hosanna over and over...we ask God to save...and when we don't get the answer we're looking for we give up, glaze over, fall asleep to his coming, lose our passion for the Lord....

And who knows...maybe we're looking in the wrong direction for that answer...OR maybe we need to wait a little longer ...OR maybe God is doing something we didn't expect that is something better than what we thought we wanted in the first place... Or maybe we just don't recognize salvation when it comes to us; it took awhile for people to figure out that salvation – the very thing the people cried out for – was not political overthrow, but it was found in the cross. Jesus answered the prayers of his people in a completely different way than what they were expecting...but he did answer them.

If you've disengaged from God...for any reason...grown silent in your heartfelt prayers...if you've lost your passion, your zeal, your enthusiasm in your faith...if you are just going through the motions right now...if the expectancy, the joy, the longing has gone out of your relationship with God...Holy Week...this week, is a good time to reengage.

Cause.. Easter is right around the corner. The resurrection stands victorious on the other side of the cross. Despair, aloofness from God, hopelessness are what the enemy wants you to think is the end of the road; but it isn't. New life in Christ waits for you...Engage this week...let your heart be on fire for the things of God; don't make it so those stones have to cry out instead of you...you cry out!

The word Hosanna belongs to us today ...WVPC...not just to that crowd in the ancient world. But to this crowd right now, here in Silicon Valley 2016...

Asking Jesus to save us, with all of our hearts, is right where God wants us to be today..

But you say, yeah okay. I know that. But I have been through so much. I can't muster the strength to engage, to shout with hope from my heart "Save Me". I am weary and worn out. Things aren't going my way. I can't have hope today – God's lucky I am here this morning. That's all the engaging I want to do.

I know many of you face challenges with health, with finances, with jobs, with court cases, with school, and with family. I know that things go wrong and life takes many turns we wish it didn't. I realize that. I also know however that the enemy's greatest weapon against God's people is discouragement.

Its easy to get discouraged in this life. Its easy for our loud Hosanna's to grow silent in this world. This is the enemy's territory. This is the place where Jesus says the devil goes around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. We live in enemy territory spiritually as much as we would live in enemy territory in wartime behind enemy lines– horrible things happen every day that we have no way to explain. The world is a dark, dark place. However I want you to know this – that it is always right and good and in the will of God to praise him. I am going to say that again; **It is always right and good and in the will of God to praise him!**

Notice how Jesus didn't say to the crowd – you know everyone...why don't you just calm down a little bit - save your Hosanna's for after the cross. You are going to see me die and its going to be awful, so don't praise me right now cause there's a lot ahead that isn't going to be so wonderful. And then when I am resurrected at Easter...you can praise me then. Sing loud Hosanna's then. Proclaim me King then...Cause there's stuff ahead on this road I am walking that is going to tough. Put your head down, get through it with me, and praise me later.



No. Its in the midst of the trial, the tribulation, the heartache, the difficulty, the challenge that we find that praise is so powerful. Our Hosannas can rock the earth and change things...Even right before Jesus goes to the cross in John's gospel we read one of Jesus' last prayers...Facing the cross in just a few hours he prays...

**“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.”** What a statement right before death. Its always true that God is victorious in the end...no matter what our circumstances are...so why not praise him now? Why hold back? Engage people...engage in his goodness...no matter what the circumstances...praise him today. Give him your all...Its powerful, and God inhabits the praises of his people. Praise brings Gods presence here because God is good all the time – *and praise is always the truth about who God is.* Engage in praising him this Holy Week, engage in celebrating and being grateful for his death and resurrection.

One of the most powerful stories I have heard about someones ability to trust and praise God in the trenches of life and his refusal to give up hope and faith in the goodness of God is the story of Austin Hatch. Austin is actually Jonathan's friend at U of Michigan – I meet some wonderful people through my kid's schools - and I had the chance to meet Austin. Great kid and on the U of Michigan basketball team– I think he is a junior there right now. But Austin was also featured on ESPN because of his story...its an unbelievable story...Austin's father was a medical doctor and a pilot and back in 2007, when Austin was 8 he was flying with his Mom, brother, sister and dad in their private plane to the family summer home, when the plane crashed and his Mom, his brother and

sister died. Austin sustained injuries as well, and yet was able to come back and be with his Dad who was struggling with the loss. The two of them became very close and spent hours in their driveway coping with the sadness by playing hoops together. Austin's Dad was a great teacher and continued to drill into Austin the importance of having a deep faith in God and a strong work ethic. Austin was a good basketball player and eventually in high school got a scholarship to the University of Michigan in 2011. His Dad was so proud of him and threw a big party to celebrate. At about that time too, Austin's Dad had just remarried and Austin had a new family – a step-mom and step-sisters whom he truly loved. Austin's Dad although he had given up flying for awhile, was back at it, teaching others to fly and to recognize that sometimes accidents happen – but not to turn your back on what you love. He was known as an excellent pilot. Eight years later, healing was happening. That June 2011, 11 days after UM had offered Austin a scholarship again Austin was with his dad and his step-mom, in the plane, going to their summer home to celebrate, when a storm came up; and the plane crashed a second time– killing his father and his step-mother. Austin was airlifted from the crash in critical condition, a 16 year old “clinging to life” as the newspapers wrote. He was in a coma for two weeks, had a massive brain injury and doctors were afraid he would never wake up, and they knew too that if he did, he would be severely brain damaged and not be able to walk or talk. However Austin did wake up, and over time, with undaunting determination was able to get to the point of being able to sit in a wheelchair and slowly speak. When he was told for the first time that he would never walk again...by the doctors, do you know what his first response was? He said to the doctor, “***Doc, do you want to see a miracle?***”

I think as Jesus walked into Jerusalem that day, despite the cross looming before him, I think he was thinking that same thing – yes folks its right to praise me because–

**Folks, do you want to see a miracle? Its about to happen...**I think that day in his heart Jesus was focusing on the miracle that would come from all this... *Yes..friends I think Jesus was saying to them..you are going to see a miracle...the best miracle ever known to humankind. The greatest salvation in the history of the world is about to happen...and it comes out of the greatest suffering. Its for you I do this. You are about to see a miracle folks...*Please look at the booklet on Psalm 22 in your bulletin. It is the meditation for the labyrinth walk. The cry of dereliction “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me” (one of Jesus last words that starts this prophetic psalm, is met with victory at the end of the psalm. This cry was not a cry of despair, but a cry of hope in God’s promises, no matter how Jesus felt in the moment. I believe Jesus had the courage to walk into Jerusalem that day, and go through the agony of the cross, because he was focusing on the miracle that was about to happen.

So did Austin, who told reporters that he believed that God has his hand on his life. That he is here still for a purpose to serve the Lord. Friends, Austin is now on the University of Michigan basketball team after what the doctors are calling a miraculous recovery. Watch the crowds reaction when he makes his first free throw ever and wins his first point...if you didn’t know his story, you would have no idea why the crowd is applauding the first free throw that he misses. He makes the second one and they give him a standing ovation...take a look...**VIDEO**

The miracle happened because Austin never gave up. He kept engaging, he kept praying, he kept hoping in his God. Jesus never gave up, even in the darkness of the cross believing that God would bring salvation out of the depths. So re-engage with passion and hope in the Living God of our salvation...this Holy Week. Don't let those rocks start talking...you praise him instead... no matter what your circumstances God will see you through...He is worthy of our praise

Everyone, lift your palms in the air as you join with that ancient crowd in looking to Jesus...the Savior of us all...Simply say in unison the words on the screen... and I'll finish the last part of each stanza for you...

**SAVE NOW O LORD – HOSANNA**...from all that pulls us away from you

**SAVE NOW O LORD – HOSANNA**...from disengaging and remaining silent, and aloof from you, when you love to hear our prayers and praises

**SAVE NOW O LORD! HOSANNA!** from our struggles with depression, hopelessness, and lack of faith and anticipation that you will come to us

**SAVE NOW O LORD! HOSANNA!** from unforgiveness, critical spirits, and an unwillingness to change

**SAVE NOW O LORD! Hosanna!** from a life of success without significance

**SAVE NOW O LORD! Hosanna!** from the sickness and pain of our bodies and souls

**SAVE NOW O LORD! Hosanna!** from destructive behaviors, that addict and destroy, and steal our life from us

**SAVE NOW O LORD! Hosanna!** from conforming to a dark world, instead of being the light.

**HOSANNA TO THE KING! BLESSED IS HE THAT COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD! HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST!!**

Let us pray....