

Help Us!

March 29, 2026

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11

As Jesus rode the donkey – maybe two donkeys, according to Matthew – into Jerusalem, the crowds gathered and shouted. They quoted Psalm 118, a song of thanksgiving and, quite possibly, related to an ancient religious procession from the city entrance to the area of the Temple at the city’s summit. They also called “Hosannah to the Son of David!”

That was a pretty bold thing to say.

As D. Mark Davis writes at [LeftBehindAndLovingIt](#), “The word “Hosanna” is only found in the entry stories of the NT. The Greek term Ὡσαννά [Hosanna] seems to be a transliteration of the Hebrew הוֹשִׁיעָה־נָא [Hoshiana]. When הוֹשִׁיעָה־נָא [Hoshiana] appears in the OT, such as in Psalm 118:25, it was translated in the LXX as σῶζω [sodzo], “to save.”

Calling for help and aid doesn’t sound so bold, but calling for it from the “Son of David” was. “Son of David” was a royal title, indicating a legitimate claim to the traditional throne of Israel and Judah. It was just short of calling Jesus, “King Jesus,” and not all that short of it.

Bold.

It could well have been even bolder, because it wasn’t just the city’s residents in the city at the time. At [JourneyWithJesus.net](#), Debie Thomas writes,

In their compelling book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*, [Marcus] Borg and [John] Crossan argue that two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday; Jesus' was not the only Triumphal Entry.

Every year, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. Why? To be present in the city for Passover — the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000.

The governor would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. They could commemorate an ancient victory against Egypt if they wanted to. But real, present-day resistance (if anyone was daring to consider it) was futile.

When the crowds shouted “Hosannah! Save us! Help us!” to Jesus, they did so aware that the ones they wanted help against – the Romans – were present, armed, and prepared to bring violence just the other side of the city.

Help us!

A bold cry, or a desperate one, or sometimes maybe there isn't much difference between desperate and bold.

Jesus chose an odd prophetic image to emulate with his donkey and colt. Jesus could have done things to look more like a traditional monarch. He might have sent his disciples to find a horse. He would have looked great on a horse. Everybody looks good on a horse – at least until it starts moving. After that it helps to know how to ride. It would have even matched a prophecy from Jeremiah rather than Zechariah.

If you want to look like a king, get a horse. Not a donkey.

They were bold and they were desperate, and they shouted, “Save us,” because even on a donkey Jesus was the best they had.

As D. Mark Davis writes, “I like how the word κράζω [kradzo] (cry out) is like an onomatopoeia, imitating the croak of a raven. It is used for both loud crowds and desperate people, like a woman crying out for help and Jesus crying out from the cross.”

Desperate people. A woman crying out for help. Jesus crying out from the cross. Matthew 27:46: “‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Help us!

I don't know for sure what that crowd wanted. As with most crowds, I suspect there was a good range. Some hoped for that royal Messiah who would cast out the Romans. Others probably hoped for a new religious, but not political, leader who would do something about the priests. I'm sorry to say that religious leaders aren't always the best of friends to the people they're supposed to serve, in the twenty-first century or in the first century. Some might have been shouting “Help us!” because of their individual needs: Healing for an illness or injury, a word of assurance for the hopeless, a gift of food for the hungry. I suspect as well that some joined the crowd and shouted and waved palms because people get caught up in that kind of excitement even when they don't know anything about what's going on. “Who is this?” they asked, and there's always plenty who don't bother to ask.

Help us!

I don't know whether Marcus Borg and John Crossan are right that Pontius Pilate entered the city on the other side as Jesus entered on the near side. It would have required some

knowledge and planning to time things that way – which, to be sure, Jesus was certainly capable of. Honestly, it doesn't matter. The crowd would have contrasted the Jesus parade with the Pilate parade. They would have noticed the distinct lack of soldiers. They would have noticed the complete lack of marching drummers and trumpeters. They would have noticed the replacement of the warhorse with the donkey.

“Crossan notes that Jesus rode ‘the most unthreatening, most un-military mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her.’” (quoted by Debie Thomas as JourneyWithJesus.net)

I'll help you, said Jesus in his choice of mount, but not quite as you think, and probably not quite as you expect, and more than you dare to hope.

I am depressingly conscious of the number of people crying out for help in the world today. Some of them are near: people on this island, O'ahu, and Maui picking up from the wreckage left by floods and high winds over the last two weeks. There is a national UCC emergency offering for that, by the way. Look for information on how to contribute to it in the Weekly Chime on Tuesday.

Others near us suffer from injuries or illness, from the pains of long-term disease, from the fogs and storms of mental illness. Some cope with grief, with feelings of failure, with the words of others telling them that they aren't of much worth. Some cope with the oppression of violence, violence from those who claim to love them, or violence of those who are supposed to protect them. Let's face it. Federal courts have clearly stated that a law enforcement agency of the United States is routinely abusing its authority, taking people into custody without due process of law, abusing those it has detained, and avoiding accountability before the courts.

If they do it in Minnesota and Maine, they'll do it in Hawai'i.

Some of those crying for help are not so near. They live in some of the world's poorest regions, vulnerable to famine or disaster. Or they live as a marginalized group of people in some of the world's most oppressive nations. Those people might be identified by skin color, or by national heritage, or by sexual orientation. These people might simply be women.

Some of them are just people living in a place engaged in war. That includes the United States. The war has come home with grief for mercifully few families so far, but the only certain thing about armed conflict is that more families will grieve. It's for certain that a lot more families are grieving in Iran, and most of them have nothing to do with the issues between the governments. That's the great tragedy and the great immorality of war. Whatever the justice of the cause – and the American administration has made no coherent explanation answering the questions of just cause – the most just cause in the world inflicts horrendous suffering on innocents. During the Second World War, it's estimated that twice as many civilians died as those in the military – and again, most of those soldiers and sailors and aircrew had nothing to do with the aggression of their governments.

There are a lot of people in the world crying, “Hosannah! Save us! Help us!”

Jesus, in the meantime, makes his way through our lives on a donkey, not a warhorse. Whatever the show on the far side of the city, the great gift is before us here.

How will he help? Not with military conquest. He didn’t do it in the first century. He’s not going to do it in the twenty-first century. Not with grandeur. He chose a donkey. Not with coercion. He didn’t force anybody to cheer him. Pilate almost certainly did.

The things that Jesus offers – nearness to God, richness of soul, abundance of life in this world and the promise of life eternal – just aren’t as grand or as compelling as the parade of Pilate. They don’t answer the cries of “Help us!” all that directly – but I ask you: if we all truly lived as Jesus calls us and as Jesus expects, would we be at war now?

I didn’t think so, either.

Help us, Jesus!

Amen.

by Eric Anderson