

“Still Getting Saved”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

March 28, 2021 – Palm Sunday

Psalm 118:12, 29-29; John 12:12-16

So a giant ship, four times the length of a football field, is still wedged between the banks of the Suez Canal. The Ever Given, this massive container ship, has been lodged there for a few days now, completely blocking the traffic that would normally flow through the canal.

According to the New York Times, about 10 billion dollars is being lost each day. That’s about 7 million dollars a minute. You would think that with so much money being lost, that herculean efforts would be taken to free this mighty ship.

And yet...that’s not exactly what has happened. Perhaps you’ve seen some of the images of the scene. One of my favorites is of the bow of the ship that has plowed into one of the canal’s banks, with one lonely piece of excavating equipment, that looks like a tiny toy in comparison to the colossal ship, trying in vain to dig it out. This image, along with many others showing what looks like a David versus Goliath scene, has spawned many a meme and many more suggestions for how to fix the problem.

Slate.com asked some of our best and brightest engineering minds to offer their recommendations to free the ship. Alex, age 12, says “Just turn the wheel to the left.” Theo, age 6 thinks “they should get giant oars and row it.” According to Teddy, age 4, “They need a crane and a rope and a ramp and a car. The car will run on the ramp and cut the rope and land on the boat with a crash. This will bump the boat back into the sea. If that doesn’t work, we could just add another car. Double force!!” Personally, I think that 8 year old Nina has the best

idea: “What’s it stuck on, sand? They should move the sand”
(<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/03/cargo-ship-stuck-in-the-suez-canal-children-have-ideas-for-how-to-move-it.html>).

Well, after bringing in much more equipment, including, following the advice of young Nina, a sand-moving suction dredger that has been clearing around 2,000 cubic meters of sand and mud each hour, the rudder at least has now been set free and *some* experts believe that the ship may soon be moved, opening up the canal again and allowing the 300 or so vessels that have been idling nearby to finally get through. We, along with hundreds of other ships’ captains, waiting patiently—or, more probably, impatiently—hope this becomes so soon.

I call attention to this story of a big, stuck ship, because it provides for us a good image for considering our own lives. There are many times that we feel like that ship: helplessly stuck, deeply mired in the muck of life, and unable to move on our own, even after our best efforts and most energetic exertions.

Such has been the case for people since the beginning of people. The stories of our religious tradition, of Adam and Eve in the garden, and of all the generations that followed them, tell us that people have always gotten themselves stuck and have always been in need of that which is beyond us to get us unstuck. And so, since the beginning, people have cried out to God for help.

In today’s lesson from the gospel of John we read of the cries for help of the multitudes gathered in Jerusalem for a Passover festival. “Hosanna!” they shouted, which means “Save, I pray!” This exuberantly offered prayer for help was a commonly used expression in Jesus’ day, and was part of one of the songs that pilgrims would sing as they steamed into Jerusalem each year to celebrate the Passover. We heard this song in our reading of Psalm 118.

During Jesus' time, the people cried out "Hosanna!" as they remembered that they were once delivered by God from Egypt and hoped that God would once again deliver them, this time, from the crushing power of Rome. And so when they exclaimed "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," they were looking for a military conqueror, a hero like David who took down the great Goliath and the enemies of Israel and reigned as their king. The people longed to be unstuck once again, and for God to set them free through violent force.

But setting people free through violence was not the mission of the Messiah Jesus. He rode into town not on a warhorse or in an armored chariot, but on a young donkey, a symbol of peace and humility. Yes, he came to set stuck people free, but he did not come to do so by the sword. His life, in fact, would end in Jerusalem that Passover week *by* the violent force of Rome and the political and religious systems that it controlled.

And yet, he rode into town that Passover to set the people free, to answer their prayer of "Hosanna" by giving his life for their salvation and for ours. For he knew that the people living under the *Pax Romana* did not truly know peace, and that the people now living under the *Pax Americana* do not know true peace. But thanks be to God, Christ came to save us and continues to come into our lives to save us.

We pray that we will be saved from our own violent ways as one horrific act of violence in our country is followed by another and yet another. We pray to be set free from the hatred of anyone different that lingers in our hearts and causes us to lash out and destroy each other with our acts and our words. We pray for salvation from the powerful and greedy forces that keep us from making just and sensible laws that will help us reduce the terrible destruction we are able to

unleash on one another. We pray that we would care for our children and our neighbors' children more than we care for our weapons and our freedom to wield them. Yes, we are stuck, seemingly unable to free ourselves from so many destructive forces at work against us, and so we cry out to God once more, "Hosanna!"

This Holy Week, as we remember the passion of the Christ, in which God experienced the fullness of human brokenness, let us not lose hope. For God knows our need; God hurts as we hurt. And just as God carried Jesus as his journey led him through the shadows of betrayal and abandonment and injustice and sorrow and death, God will carry us through. We are still getting saved. Praise be to God!