

Help! We're stuck -- Palm Sunday 2017

Mark 11:1-11

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Friday night, David and I, with Karen and Mike Mitri, had the great good fortune of being in the audience at 'Come From Away,' the new Broadway musical that you've probably been hearing about. If you get the chance, get yourself a ticket. Because it is one entertaining, poignant, raucous, thoughtful gem of a play.

Maybe you know the premise.

'Come from away' is the story -- the true story -- of what happened in the little town of Gander, Newfoundland on September 11 2001.

As the horror of the twin towers unfolded, as the Pentagon was hit, no one knew whether another attack was imminent -- and so U.S. airspace was closed.

Flights to the U.S. were cancelled --

but of course there were any number of flights already in the air.

And 38 of them -- 38 passenger planes -- were diverted to Gander, Newfoundland, a town of 9,000 people and one rarely-used airport.

As you probably remember, our airspace remain closed for 4 days.

So 38 plane-fulls of people were stuck in Gander.

7,000 people in a town of 9,000.

"Come from away" is about what happened during those four days, and what happened was remarkable.

The townspeople opened their homes, their buildings, their restaurants, their hearts to, as they called them, "the plane people."

They offered meals, spare beds and air mattresses, extra clothing.

But most of all -- as the play makes clear -- they opened up a space where seven thousand frightened and overwhelmed people could be safe and cared for.

It's an incredible story, and it's a powerful evening of theater.

At the beginning, though, the plane people have no idea of the kindness they are about to experience.

Mostly, they're confused and in many cases terrified.

Their planes have been grounded, and for 14 hours no one is let off the planes, as the flight staff frantically await word from the FAA as to what to do next.

14 hours on the runway -- 38 planes stuck, 7,000 people stuck.

And the play shows them, trapped and frightened -- frantically trying to call from the few cell phones that were on board, trying to understand what's happened -- because no one knows. No one knows what's actually happened. They're trapped, stuck, in the dark figuratively and literally, calling for help, and waving frantically from the plane windows to the people they see on the ground.

And then finally, they're let off and into the arms of welcome, into warm homes where kindness awaits and compassion surrounds them.

It's a beautiful play; laughter and sorrow in equal measure. But it starts with thousands of people stuck and in desperate need of help.

And strangely that leads us right into Palm Sunday. Needless to say, the Palm Sunday story has nothing to do with marooned planes or marooned anything, but it has everything to do with people who are stuck, and in profound need of help -- people, thousands of people, who are anxious and worried and even fearful, stuck and calling out for help.

You know the story, and you've heard Jason just tell it again. Jesus and his followers have been out in the countryside of Judea, traveling from place to place, town to town. And everywhere they've gone people have flocked to Jesus for help, seeking healing, seeking hope. And receiving it. And now it's Jerusalem's turn -- Jerusalem, where Jesus knows full well his enemies await. But he also knows how many people are there who need his help.

And that's ultimately, what the first Palm Sunday was. A whole lot of people calling out for help. A whole of people stuck, you could say, stuck and needing help.

You have to imagine the scene. The streets of Jerusalem were swarming with people, not just the people who lived there year-round, but hundreds of others, who had come to the Holy City for the festival of Passover. Passover -- when Jews remember their liberation from slavery in Egypt. And for these folks, it was a poignant celebration, because remembering their liberation long ago meant also remembering how oppressed they were now, in Jerusalem.

Struggling under the harshness of Roman occupation,  
 poor and getting poorer,  
 the people of Israel were longing for rescue,  
 aching for someone who would show them compassion,  
 praying day in and day out for a savior.

And on this particular day, a rumor begins to run through the crowds that **help** is coming.  
 There's a man coming into town that people are saying is the Son of David,  
 the promised savior.

And the crowds begin running to the main street,  
 everyone grabbing branches to wave in jubilation,  
 people throwing their cloaks into the road to create a red carpet for the Son of David.  
 And as a man dressed in the simple clothes of a villager comes up the road,  
 riding on a donkey,

the people begin to shout, and what they shout is *Hosanna* --  
 and what does Hosanna mean?

It actually means help! Help!

Hosanna literally means *save us!* Save us!

Help! We are stuck!

We are frightened and overwhelmed.

Hosanna, Jesus, *Hosanna* --

Help! Save us, help!

That's what they were shouting.

So here we are,  
 two thousand years later, remembering that moment.  
 And yeah, we've got our palm branches in hand,  
 but other than that, we don't really have that much in common with those crowds back then, right?  
 We don't need help, right?  
 No real reason for us to yell Hosanna if Hosanna means "save us".  
 What do we need saving from? What do we need help with?  
 We're not stuck.

Well, sure we are.

We're all stuck. Somehow. We all need help. Of some kind.

Here's my analogy.

And it has to do with snow.

Yes, on this bright spring morning, I'm talking about snow.

Bear with me.

A few weeks back, when we *did* have snow,

one morning after the roads had been cleared, my son Andres and I were driving downtown.  
 And as we turned off Bronson Road onto Sturges Road,  
 we passed a car that had pulled over to the side of the road.  
 Or so it seemed.

Andres, a little more eagle-eyed than I,  
 said "I think that guy back there is stuck!"

So we did what you do.

I found a place to turn around, and we went back,  
 we parked the car and hopped out to see what was going on.

And as we neared his car,  
 the older gentleman behind the wheel rolled down his window and said,  
 with a fair measure of chagrin,  
 "I'm stuck in the snow!"

And so, again, we did what you do: we pushed him out.

We've all been there.

For me, it was 1983, twenty years old, driving with a friend in a blinding snowstorm on the Jersey Turnpike --

I pulled off the road and got stuck.

Rescued by a tow-truck operator named Nick Puleio,

whose name has always stuck with me because he couldn't have been kinder to us.

David had to be rescued a couple winters ago when he chose the snowiest week of the year to go for one of his writing retreats in the Berkshires.

He tried to go up a hill in his Camry,

slid off into a snowbank,

and was extricated by a nice guy from Williamstown --

who also helpfully shared with David that the governor had actually declared a snow emergency that morning,

and he might want to get himself off the roads before the state troopers noticed him.

My son didn't have that interesting a story --

he just got stuck at the bottom of our driveway this year,

so pushing him out was a family affair.

The point of all this is just to say that if you are a human who drives or has driven or will drive a car

and if you live north of the Mason-Dixon line,

you will inevitably at some point in your life be stuck in the snow.

It will be part of your life.

And you will need someone to push you out.

You will, inevitably, need help.

And if you are a human,  
 whether or not you drive a car,  
 and wherever in God's world you live,  
 you will inevitably at some point find that *you* are stuck.  
 It will be part of your life.  
 And you will, again inevitably, need help.

So these palms, they belong in our hands, just like the crowds long ago,  
 and the word Hosanna, it belongs on our lips, just like the crowds long ago.  
 Hosanna -- help me.  
 Hosanna -- save me.  
 Hosanna -- I'm stuck.

How so? What am I talking about? How are we stuck?  
 How are **you** stuck?

I can't tell you that -- you're the one who knows.  
 All I can do is ask you this question.  
 Is there someplace in your life right now where you need help?  
 Is there something holding you down, holding you back?  
 What are you mired in?  
 Where are you stuck?

It could be something you can't forgive.  
 Could be a worry you can't shake.  
 Could be a corner you just can't yet turn.  
 Could be something you want to be -- but aren't yet.  
 You're the only one who knows.  
 But chances are -- there's somewhere in your life where a Hosanna is appropriate --  
*save me, Lord. Help.*

Like many of you are doing,  
 I read our church's daily Lenten devotional every morning.  
 And as you probably know,  
 each day's devotional consists of a little scripture reading,  
 and then a reflection written by you, by one of you,  
 and then a prayer at the end.  
 And I started noticing something.  
 I started noticing how many of our prayers say "help," mine included.

*Dear Lord, says one, help me to be more like your Son.*

*Lord, help me to be Christ-like in my thoughts, words and actions when someone reaches out to me for help.*

*Help me to look past the walls that keep us from seeing into each other's hearts.*

*Help us to love others as fully as you do.*

*Help me to pray hard, and often; help me stay in contact with you.*

Our prayers admit what we know to be true:  
 that we all get stuck.  
 Stuck behind walls.  
 Stuck in a lonely place.  
 Stuck being not quite who we wanted to be.  
 Stuck being anxious, not trusting; wary and not hopeful.  
 We get stuck.  
 Wheels spinning in the snow,  
 not moving forward,  
 increasingly worried.  
 We get stuck.  
 And we need, we all need, help.  
*Hosanna, Lord -- help.*

And here's the wonderful thing about our God.  
 Help comes.  
 Help comes.

Those people stuck in Gander, Newfoundland almost 17 years ago --  
 they found that out.  
 God's help came to them in the shape of angels who stayed up all night making sandwiches,  
 showed up with diapers and formula for their babies,  
 put a cot down for them in the corner of a classroom.  
 God's help came in a Walmart cashier who said to the person she was serving, *you look like you might want a warm shower, follow me home --*  
 and in the townspeople who put on silly costumes to entertain the children.  
 God's help came in the form of the librarian who found a quiet corner for those were Muslim to pray in privacy,  
 and a place for the Hindus to worship, too.  
 God's help came in the people who cried with the mother who learned her New York firefighter son never came back to his station.

And help comes to us, each of us who is stuck.  
In the kindness of another, in the prayers of a friend;  
in an unexpected joy, or a moment of great peace.  
Help comes in the people around us through whom God speaks,  
and the Spirit that lightens our own.

But all comes back to the one who rode into Jerusalem  
on the back of a donkey  
this day two thousand years ago.

Hosanna, the people called out to Jesus,  
Help us, save us.  
And he did.  
He saved them, saved us,  
by offering the rescue that only the Prince of Peace could bring,  
a rescue that only a gentle Savior on a cross could give,  
a rescue that only the King of Love could offer.  
He lived to death and beyond so that we would never live alone.  
He loved to death and beyond so that we would never be unloved.

**Help us, we say. We're stuck.**

**Save us.**

And the Christ of Palm Sunday says, simply,  
*I do. I have. I will -- forever.*

Amen.