

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

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I grew up absolutely loving Palm Sunday. In my home congregation the whole experience was pretty amazing! It was festive, it was joyous, it was dramatic, and it was loud. The stained-glass windows reverberated as music from the electronic Baldwin organ filled that small sanctuary. There were loads of palm branches on hand for people to wave during the singing of all five verses of “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” I loved that procession. It was like a parade. Kids of all ages with palm branches in hand, making their way down the aisle and around the sides of the pews shouting, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*”

After the worship service, people lingered and talked; mostly outside, and Kids played outside on the church lawn on this sunny morning. I only remember it being sunny, probably selective memory on my part, it was the Pacific Northwest after all. But I can’t ever remember Palm Sunday being anything other than sunny. In my memory, Palm Sunday was always bright, warm, safe, festive, and joyous. But the original Palm Sunday was a lot different. It was far from fun, and it wasn’t at all safe. In fact, it was hostile, terrifying and oppressive. And yet, what happened on that day and through the days of that first Holy Week have reverberated through the centuries right up to today. To understand that, we have to take a look at the original story from Matthew 21:1-11.

¹ *When [Jesus and his disciples] had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵ “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus*

had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

For so many people, the story of that first Palm Sunday is so familiar that it’s easy to miss some important details. So let me fill in just a few gaps. As the first century opens, the Roman government was extremely powerful and their occupation of the land was incredibly oppressive and brutal. Anyone or anything that got in the way of Rome was met with immediate intimidation and hostile, terrifying force. We can hardly imagine. The Jewish people lived under this horrific rule of this oppressive power. It hadn’t always been like that. Before the Roman occupation, the Jewish people had been free. They lived in peace with one another, they governed themselves, and they even had their own currency. One of their coins featured a palm branch which represented hope and promise, new life—even immortality. A palm branch was a symbol of victory, of triumph, of peace, and eternal life. But on that first Palm Sunday there was a thick tension in the air. On that bright, clear morning, there wasn’t just one procession, there were actually two; two processions coming into the city of Jerusalem from opposite sides of the city.

On that first Palm Sunday, if we were somehow able to see drone footage of what was going on from up above, from overhead, we would see one procession coming from the west side of the city. And we would see there Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entering Jerusalem at the head of a column of several hundred soldiers. Just imagine this stunning display of power and control, a highly potent visual sign of who is in charge. It was a message of the kingdom of Caesar complete with a cavalry of horses, foot soldiers, armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles. We would hear the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The crowds were filled with silent onlookers,

some curious, some in awe, many, if not most, watching in fear.

On that first Palm Sunday from the east side of the city, we would see Jesus riding a donkey, coming down from the Mount of Olives, processing into the city from the east side. The people cried out, *“Hosanna to the son of David!”* Jesus is cheered on by his followers - these simple, humble, kind, ordinary people. And Jesus’ message had been about the kingdom of God breaking through everywhere, and here it was breaking through in that place at that moment. *“Hosanna!”* they called out. It’s a shout of adoration and joy, for sure. But *“Hosanna”* was also a word used in scriptures as a prayer; Hosanna was also understood as a cry for salvation and rescue. *“Save us now, Lord!”* or *“Bring your salvation here!”*

So, on that Palm Sunday, as Jesus rides the donkey into Jerusalem, and the people are waving palm branches and laying them down on the road ahead of him, it was more than just a little subversive. It was an act of defiance against the oppressive force of Rome. It was a powerful statement that the people wanted to be free, and that the man coming into town riding on a donkey was going to change things and restore what had been lost. Jesus was understood as the one who saves; the one who rescues, he is the Lord. And when they shouted *“Hosanna!”* they were acknowledging him as their Messiah. So, on that first Palm Sunday the message was clear: Pilate’s procession proclaimed the power of fear, force, and oppression. And Jesus’ procession proclaimed the power of the kingdom of God, full of hope and promise and freedom.

So that brings us to THIS Palm Sunday. On this Palm Sunday, Jesus is once again part of a procession. Jesus entered our lives to offer us a new way, a different way, an alternative way to live.

On this Palm Sunday, Jesus enters our lives to show us how to live authentically with our sisters and brothers of every race and nation; to show us how to build authentic community together where everyone has an opportunity to thrive; to show us how to learn from our broken past in order to create a healing future that brings resurrected life to everyone.

On this Palm Sunday, Jesus enters our lives to show us a way to live differently, to love differently, to serve differently, to see differently; a way of focusing on what God is doing in us – everyone of us – and through us – everyone of us – to bring more abundant life to the world.

I told you at the beginning of our service that Holy

Week begins with a shout and ends with a whisper. *“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”* leads to only one place, and that place is the cross of Good Friday, where Jesus whispers, *“It is finished.”* And so as we enter into the journey of this Holy Week, as we live into each of these important days between the shout and the whisper, let me just challenge you with two important questions:

First, thinking about your life, right now, what needs to be finished? What needs to be done with? What does Jesus need to help you bring to an end? Let’s just think about our health. Do you struggle with a sense of hopelessness after a year of Covid? Are you weary, just don’t feel like you have the energy to keep going? Well, friends, when I feel that way I remember that Jesus enters our lives today with hope and promise and says, *“It is finished. Let me show you a new way to live.”*

Think about our relationships. Are you at war with someone? Are you holding on to some grudge that seems to be festering inside? Are there relationships that were once alive and thriving, now broken and hurting? Friends, the message of Palm Sunday is that Jesus enters our lives and says, it’s finished, that can be done with. Let me show you a new way to live. Maybe on a very personal level, is the power of guilt and shame that holds you back and won’t let you go still at work in you? Whatever it is that needs to be finished, Jesus enters our lives today and says, *“It is finished. That can be done with. Let me show you a new way to live.”*

And that leads to this. Friends, if there is something that needs to be finished, something that is coming to an end, then there is also the promise and the hope of a new beginning. So during this week that we call holy, that’s the question that we get to live with. What is it that God is bringing to life in you? What is it that God is bringing to life in us, through us? As we follow Christ from where he is coming down the Mount of Olives through this week of a trial, of a beating, of a crucifixion, and all that is beyond that, how will we live into this story? May God bless you in your journey through Holy Week. Let’s pray.

Gracious God, as we move through these days, we pray that You would give us the courage to follow You. We pray that You would speak to us and remind us that You are doing a new thing. May we be Your faithful people who follow You through these days into a meal, through a trial, and on toward the crucifixion and everything that comes after that. All of this we pray in the strong name of Christ. Amen.