

Pastor's Message - Palm/Passion Sunday (4/2/23)
Matthew 21:1-11
The Passion According to Matthew

"The hope and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Why begin with this line from the Christmas carol: "O Little Town of Bethlehem?" Why Jesus? Why suffering? Why His death on the cross? Not that long ago, less than four months ago, we sang this Carol on Christmas Eve, little knowing or remembering that the events of this Holy Week, beginning with today's Palm Sunday are the hopes and dreams of redemption.

Palm Sunday used to be one of the major celebratory Sundays of the church year, with real palm branches waved by children ushering in our King, today it has almost been forgotten – no parades, no processions. Over time this celebration has given way to an emphasis on the somber reality of Passion Sunday, with a few palms thrown in for good measure. Some of that is due to the de-emphasis of Holy Thursday and Good Friday by the fewer number of people who attend Holy Thursday or Good Friday services. We cannot move from the celebration of Palm Sunday right into the celebration of Easter without experiencing the agony and death of Good Friday. There are good reasons for a Passion Sunday worship service on this day that bridges Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

The processions for the day are in the Bible readings for today: in the opening reading from Matthew 21 and then in the Passion story from Matthew. In those readings, we can hear and feel the juxtaposition of violence, love, and hope dramatically in the contrast between the processions that begin and end this service. We begin with Jesus' procession into Jerusalem, met with both joyous expectation by some, and curious or hostile wonder by others. We conclude with the reading of Matthew's account of Jesus' procession to his place of execution and what unfolds there.

We heard how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey – some Bible translations say that he rode two animals: the donkey and the colt of the donkey. To modern ears, this moment is just weird. But it was not weird for a man, or a woman, in Jesus' day to ride a donkey. In developing countries today, this is still a common sight. But it was a bit on the strange side for someone purporting to be a king to enter the capital city on a donkey instead of a horse, as the provincial governor, Pilate, must have done about the same time.

If you were a first-century Jew, much of this would have made sense. God's people had been waiting for the Messiah. They'd been waiting for someone, sent from God, who would rule and change the world. In the Old Testament book of Zechariah, there's a prediction concerning the world's one true king and how he would make himself known: "Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet

he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt." (Zechariah 9:9 NLT). We heard that today.

When the people welcome Jesus through the city gates, they are looking for a winner. Palm branches were used to welcome victors in war, military heroes who had saved the Jewish people from their enemies. The people wave palm branches and call out "Hosanna" because they anticipate that Jesus will save them from Roman occupation. But the would-be "king of the Jews" doesn't act very kingly. He allows himself to be arrested, to be hung up on a cross like a common criminal. When the crowds realize that Jesus isn't the kind of hero they expected, they turn on him.

Disappointment turns to rage.

What are our expectations? Perhaps they are like that of the donkey?

In all of the focus on Jesus, no one gives a thought to or remembers the donkey on which Jesus rode during that triumphant Palm Sunday procession. Wasn't the donkey important too?

The donkey awakened the next morning, his mind still savoring the afterglow of the most exciting day of his life. Never before had he felt such a rush of pleasure and pride.

He walked into town and found a group of people by the well. "I'll show myself to them," he thought.

But they didn't notice him. They went on drawing their water and paid him no mind.

"Throw your garments down," he said crossly. "Don't you know who I am?"

They just looked at him in amazement. Someone slapped him across the tail and ordered him to move.

"Miserable heathens!" he muttered to himself. "I'll just go to the market where the good people are. They will remember me."

But the same thing happened. No one paid any attention to the donkey as he strutted down the main street in front of the marketplace.

"The palm branches! Where are the palm branches!" he shouted. "Yesterday, you threw palm branches!"

Hurt and confused, the donkey returned home to his mother.

"Foolish child," she said gently. "Don't you realize that without him, you are just an ordinary donkey?"

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life. We know some, but not all, of the details.

- He was not particularly young, considering the life expectancy of a man of his time.
- He was most definitely not rich.
- His groupies were limited to 12 men of limited resources and a few women of uncertain reputations.

And while his followers often could not believe that he could really die, we know that he could and he did. It was as senseless to his disciples then as, on the face of it, it is senseless to us today.

The one detail we know for certain is that this story never ends.

It did not end in a procession in Jerusalem.

It did not end on a cross.

It did not end in a cave on the property of Joseph of Arimathea.

The story continues. It continues in the lives of people like you and me in whom the living Christ continues to work wonders.

The story continues in us who are called to keep it alive.

The story continues. It is an irresistible story, a life-changing story for those of us who have, by grace, found ourselves following Jesus.

Palm Sunday parade has cross-purposes: On the one hand, there's the crowd gathered for the festivities, smiling and shouting, "Praise the Lord!" and clapping their hands. The crowd scene represents the joyous side of the story, and the joyous side of this day: the Palm Sunday side. It is the part where we've got all the regular folks enjoying the fun of the moment, thinking that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to be crowned as king, and so they joined in the mood of glory and hope, played along, shouted "Hosanna" and waved their palm leaves around like we enact in the processional on this Sunday before Easter. They even took off their cloaks and dropped them on the ground before him, making a royal carpet so that his majesty's royal feet would not even have to touch the ground!

But we know that, by the end of the week, they had changed their tune. Jesus had not fulfilled their expectations.

What are our expectations about how God saves? Do we set ourselves up for disappointment because we confuse modes of human victory with God's saving grace? The core revelation of Palm/Passion Sunday is this: God doesn't save in the ways we might expect. God doesn't rule the way humans do. God dominates with love, not violence. God overpowers through sacrifice, not by taking away. God wins by suffering, not humiliating—suffering and aligning God's self with those who suffer.

Just like the donkey who carried Jesus in Jerusalem, our expectations may not be fulfilled.

Today we begin our worship in the usual way – with songs of praise and the lifting up and waving of palm branches. Today on Palm Sunday we, too, shout our praises before quieting our voices to enter into the passion of our God. Today, we begin the final leg of the journey: from the lifting up of palms to the lifting up of Jesus – on the cross and from the tomb.