

Pastor's Message – Palm/Passion Sunday

Mark 11:1-10

Mark 15:1-20

Lent is over; welcome to Palm Sunday. Today we begin Holy Week with cheers and palm branches and cloaks on the roads only to end the week with death and despair. Today we begin the last part of our journey that we have been travelling from Ash Wednesday and all throughout our worship services during Lent. Today we begin the last leg of our journey being guided to the cross of Jesus.

Palm Sunday seems to be all about this parade into Jerusalem, doesn't it? With all the waving of palms and the shouts of "Hosanna!" and "Praise God!" and the declarations of "Blessed is he." Cloaks are placed on the road. There seems to be a lot of celebration over the arrival of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem.

But then we look at what Jesus is riding on. Sure, they can be cute, especially the miniature ones. But, a donkey? It does not seem right. It doesn't seem to fit. If this is a celebration, a happy parade, a victory parade, then shouldn't Jesus be riding on a big white horse? Shouldn't he be on a large and fancy float tossing out handfuls of candy and waving and smiling?

But he is not. He is on a donkey, a beast of burden, a work animal, a lowly creature, a mode of transport for the poor. Why is this important? Because it tells us that this is not a prideful parade. It is a humble parade. Jesus comes into his last week on this earth as a humble king riding on a humble donkey. This picture is a fulfillment of the prophecy from Zechariah: "Behold, your king is coming to you; humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). What is the message of this image of Jesus riding on a donkey? It is a message of humility, which sets the tone for the week to come.

Jesus comes to us on Palm Sunday in humility, not as a triumphant, regal, proud king. If we look back on Jesus' life, his parents, Mary and Joseph, most likely rode into Bethlehem on a donkey the night he was born

in a humble manger there. So, it is only natural that he comes to the end of his life on earth in the same way, in a humble fashion.

Now as we look ahead to the days to come for Jesus, we are guided to the humility of the cross and the suffering he will experience along the way there. Crucifixion is a humbling, humiliating way to die, to be sure, and Jesus knew it was just on the horizon for him. So, he begins his humble journey here on Palm Sunday.

Are there other hints of humility on this day? We marched around the church singing "Hosanna!" It sounds like hooray, but it is actually a cry for help. It means "Save us!" The people of Jerusalem on that day that we now celebrate as Palm Sunday are desperate for rescue from their Roman occupancy, but whether they know it or not, the people are in a more desperate need, that of rescue from sin and death. So, contrary to the sound of the word, there is an overtone of humility in the cry of "Hosanna!" Inwardly, people are feeling beaten down, pushed around, oppressed, under the thumb of other forces. Their lives are in a humble and needy condition.

Then think about the cloaks strewn on the road. You wouldn't expect these to be fancy garments if they are allowed to get dusty and dirty like this. Only those with ratty, unkempt clothing would even consider putting what they are wearing down on the road to be trampled on walked over by a crowd of people and a donkey. The placing of cloaks on the path in front of Jesus on the donkey is a humble act, something that is done out of selflessness and poverty. Yet this act, too, points to the humility of Christ on the cross soon to come.

Jesus' feet will walk the streets of Jerusalem in few days' time, on his final road to the cross. Soldiers will gamble for his cloak as he is hanging on the cross dying. As the psalmist would predict, "They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:18). Humbling to have very few clothes and to have what clothes you did own sold in front of you. Cloaks on the road this Palm Sunday foreshadow that stark reality to come for Jesus.

Even the palm branches we wave have a humble aspect to them. Now they are green and pretty, but when you take them home, they will soon dry out and turn brown and brittle. They will not look like this green color for long because they have been cut from the tree on which they grew, from the source of their nourishment and their vibrancy.

Traditionally, as many of you may know, the dried-up palm branches from this Palm Sunday are later ground up into ash to be used to place on people's heads on the next Ash Wednesday, when the person placing the ashes there says to us, "You are dust and to dust you shall return." The palm branches become for us a humbling reminder that we are human, we are finite, we will die. But think about this: What shape are ashes in that are placed on foreheads? They are in the shape of a cross. That indicates to us that it is ultimately the cross that will lift us up from our poor and miserable state as sinners and free us from the sin and death that are inevitable without the cross.

All of this brings us back to the cross. Palm Sunday, and on this day, Passion Sunday as well, has a dual focus, one that looks at the palm parade and one that looks at the Passion (the suffering) of our Lord that is to come most prominently and spectacularly on the cross.

In humility, Jesus went to the cross. He did not object or complain or get upset. He went willingly. We are reminded on this day of St. Paul's words from Philippians 2: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (vv. 3-8). This passage from the Bible paints a vivid picture for us of the entire life of humility that Jesus led, which ultimately came to its most humble point on the cross. But why set up this humble scenario, this painful scene? To make us feel bad? To make us feel guilty?

No, it is to remind us of the verses that follow that stand in stark contrast to the verses we just read. Listen to what Paul says immediately after the words "death on a cross." St. Paul says, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Humility on the cross is a means to an end. The greatest means to an end that there ever was. Jesus humbled himself completely and was then exalted over everything. We bow in humble adoration to the One whose name is above all in heaven. Our voices will one day shout in celebration to the King of kings who dwelt in humility that we might be lifted up to the highest place with him in paradise. What he did he did not for himself but for us.

So, what should we do in response? The only thing we can do: Live humble lives for him. St. Paul reminds us that Jesus "died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Corinthians 5:15). And we, in humility, live for others too.

Like the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, we should stop and help those in need on the side of our journey of faith when we see them. We should honor and love them and care for them as Jesus did for us on the cross. There is no place for arrogance in the Body of Christ. We each look out for the other without seeking any accolades. Jesus riding on a donkey is our humble model to follow. With his hands and feet, he went to the cross not for himself but for us. So now it is our turn to be his hands and feet in the world, humbly entering into every place with his care for all.

Be guided to the cross. Be guided to humility. Live as a humble part of the Body of Christ. Let his name be exalted in all you say and do. Amen.