

Palms, Hosanna, and the Passion

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Today, we commemorate and celebrate the day Jesus entered Jerusalem like a King. We call it *Palm Sunday*. It is also called *the Triumphal Entry* in many Scripture readings. It is the first day of the most Holy Week of the Christian calendar. This is the Week of the Passion of our Lord which culminates in His death on the cross. On this day, Jesus entered Jerusalem amid throngs of people. They waved palms to welcome Jesus. We have done the same this morning. The palm branches they waved were date palm branches, not the same size as the ones we waved this morning. Those were much bigger, usually between six and twelve feet in length. They were significant for two reasons.

The palms were a sign that dates back to the Exodus. In Leviticus 23, God directed the people of Israel to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt. In v. 40, God says, “you shall take . . . the branches of palm trees and you shall rejoice before the Lord, your God seven days . . . that your generations may know that I made the people dwell in booths (crude huts made of tree branches) when I brought them out of the Land of Egypt . . .”

In recognition of this command, according to 1 Kings 6:29, Solomon had palm trees carved on the walls of the temple, both inner and outer sanctuaries. So, palm branches represented victory and deliverance to God's Old Testament people.

But they were significant for another reason. These palm trees also had become a symbol of nationalism. In 141 B.C., when Simon the Maccabee defeated Greek forces who had occupied Jerusalem, he was welcomed as a conqueror and liberator by the people waving palm branches and singing songs of praise. In 164-5 B.C., palm branches were used in the rededication of the temple after it was desecrated by the Greek leader Antiochus IV, Epiphanes. (Jesus cleansed the temple when He arrived in Jerusalem Himself.) Palm branches became a symbol of nationalism and pride for God's New Testament people.

The oppressive rule by the Romans reminded the people of the oppressive rule of the Greeks. Jesus was seen as the Messiah. He was seen as the Savior. He would deliver them. It was appropriate to welcome Him with palm branches and songs. But the people were confused. They wanted and needed a Messiah. They wanted and needed someone to save them, someone to liberate them. They needed someone to free them from oppression. They were confused. They had the wrong enemy in view.

When they shouted, "Hosanna," the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, "*hoshiy'ah na*," they implored Jesus with the words, "Save us, please," or "Save us, now." These words are from the Book of Psalms. They were well known by the Jews of Jesus' day. They were a part of the great *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118). These words were sung by the Temple choir at Passover and other feasts. During Passover, these words were sung when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed. Psalm 118:26 reads, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The crowds

added the words, “even the King of Israel,” which are not found in v. 26. The word “Hosanna” had come to mean simply “Salvation” or “Salvation has come.” The crowd directed this cry specifically to the “Son of David,” or the descendant of David—the rightful heir to the throne of Israel. They directed them to Jesus. Their words indicated that the crowd saw Jesus as the Messiah. He had come in the name of God who sent Him. He would deliver them by the power of the Lord of Hosts. He was their king. They were confused. While He was their king, He was not their earthly king. He was the King of Kings but not like King David.

Pilate will ask Jesus later in the week at His trial whether He is a king. And, after he has had Jesus flogged, Pilate will say to the crowd, “Behold your king” and the crowd will call for Jesus’ crucifixion, the crucifixion of their king. Pilate asked them directly, “Shall I crucify your king?” The response was that the Jews only had Caesar as their king. What total and utter hypocrisy is this answer from the chief priests. They were deluded and confused. What an irony that they were denying Jesus as the King of Kings and their allegiance was to a temporal king who subjugated them.

In the Gospel reading this morning, some Greeks wished to see Jesus. He told them that what had been planned for centuries was now to be fulfilled. There was no confusion about what was about to happen according to Jesus. Several times previously, Jesus had said, “My hour has not come.” Now He is clear. His hour had arrived.

It is most interesting that Jesus compared His death and resurrection to a seed that is planted in the ground. The seed of sin came from a piece of fruit that was eaten in the Garden of Eden by Adam and Eve. How even more interesting is that the Hebrew word “*zera*” which means “seed” is used in Genesis 2:15 when God makes the first promise of a savior. God says to the serpent, Satan, “between your “seed” (often translated as “offspring”) and her “seed” (Eve’s offspring) he (the Savior shall bruise your head (Satan)...” The “seed,” Jesus, will deliver God’s people from sin, Satan, and death—the same death from which Jesus delivered Lazarus; the same sin, Satan, and death from which He has delivered you and me because of our abject sinfulness before God.

Jesus was about to die, and like Lazarus and all of us, He will be placed in a tomb where He will sleep not unlike the seeds which we will soon plant this spring. But, just like those seeds, Jesus will rise from death and demonstrate His glory in defeating sin, Satan, and death. He will show the magnificence of every flower that ever bloomed including all the lilies and hyacinths and daffodils we will see here in the church next Sunday. His glory was acknowledged and rewarded, not once but twice, by God the Father.

Jesus’ disciples, the Greeks, the crowd of people surrounding Jesus as He entered Jerusalem, and even the religious leaders, were all confused about Jesus. They were further confused when Jesus spoke of His death at the end of this week when He would be lifted up on a cross. They did not hear His words that the “ruler of the world,” Satan, would be defeated (cast out).

They assumed that their Messiah, their Christ, would live forever. He would but not as they understood. They were confused.

They did not notice the symbolism of Jesus entering the City of Jerusalem through the Sheep's Gate, so named because the lambs to be sacrificed at the Passover were brought into the city through this portal. The Lamb of God, so named by His cousin John the Baptist, passed through that gate just like those sheep to be sacrificed.

Everything about this day—the palms, the words shouted by the crowds, the words of Jesus, the very events as they unfolded—pointed to the end of the week. They pointed to God's plan of salvation, announced thousands of years before. Salvation was to come by a sacrificial death, first demonstrated at the beginning of the Exodus and commemorated annually by God's people at the Feast of Passover. The time had come, but the people were confused.

They did not see what was before them. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the Savior. Jesus was the Sacrifice for sin. It was all clear before them. He stood before them and told them so. Jesus was their Savior. Jesus was their Messiah.

All of us are in the crowds today as we commemorate Palm Sunday. However, we have the luxury of hindsight. We know what this week means. We know who our Savior is. We know what He will save us from. We know how He will do it. We know that this is the plan of God for our salvation. God has told us in His Word. This week is for us and our salvation.

This morning, as you heard the wonderful Word of God that described this Palm Sunday, Jesus was speaking to you when He said, “Walk in the light, believe in the light that you may become sons (and daughters) of the light.”

When you read God’s Word, it becomes abundantly clear what this week is all about. God’s Word shows us the great intricacy of God’s plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. It shows the workings of God throughout all human time to restore us to Him through His Son, really through Him. It shows us the why, the where, and the how.

This week, follow Jesus on His path to the cross. I encourage you to read one of the Gospel accounts or all of them starting at the Triumphal Entry and ending in the death of Jesus. Follow Jesus each day. On only one day there is no activity. If you read the Gospel accounts, you will know which day that is.

Come here this week on Thursday evening as we commemorate Jesus’ institution of the Sacrament which foreshadows the sacrifice. Join us at noon on Friday to follow Jesus’ steps on his way to the cross. And on Friday night, come to commemorate His death as foretold in Scripture and fulfilled on the cross.

This is the most Holy Week of our Church Year. Do not be confused. It is a week in which God saves us by the death of His innocent Son. It is a week where undeserved grace is exchanged for utter abject sinfulness which is heaped upon Jesus. It is a week when sin, Satan, and death are defeated. Do not be confused about this week. It is not about chocolates, dyed eggs, ham dinners, and special dresses. It is not about

extravagant brunches or national athletic competitions or political drama. It is not about the arrival of spring.

This week is all about our salvation. It is about the death of Jesus. It is about our death with Him through our baptism. It is about the coming day of Resurrection. It is about the coming day of Jesus in glory.

May you be blessed in your observances of the events of this Week of the Passion. May the Holy Spirit open your eyes to the powerful message of your deliverance from sin, Satan, and death so you will walk in the light and not in the darkness. May the hope of the coming Day of the Resurrection prepare you for the day described in Revelation 7:9-10 when you join the multitude of saints in heaven, dressed in white, holding palms in your hand and crying in a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God . . . and the Lamb.” Amen.