

Palm Sunday

March 28, 2021

Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

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Today, we celebrate and remember Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of His Passion.

On one Palm Sunday, a faithful family was all prepared to attend worship, as all of you did this morning, but just before leaving, one of the children, a little boy named Eddie, suddenly had a tummy ache and you know the rest of the story. After the cleaning up, mom decided that she should stay home from church with her sick son, and dad and the rest of the family would attend the Palm Sunday service as planned. On their return home from church, everyone was holding the palm branches that they had received, just as you received this morning. Eddie who had not been able to attend asked, *"Why do you have those palm branches?"* The dad answered him by saying, *"Well, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved Palm Branches to honor Him, so we all got palm branches today."* The little boy replied, *"Oh, no!"* and began to cry. Mom raced in thinking there had been a repeat of the vomiting from earlier in the morning. Seeing that wasn't the case, she asked the little boy, *"Why are you crying? Is your stomach hurting?"* The little boy replied, *"No. No. I missed church today and wouldn't you know it today was the Sunday that Jesus was there!"*

The dad had told the story about the palms, but it wasn't quite the full story. The story needed a little more detail to be accurate and meaningful. We have all heard the story of Palm Sunday. Today we heard it from two Gospels writers although it is found in all four of the Gospels. Most of the details are consistent with each other although it is interesting to compare the four Gospel versions to see the different focus and emphasis each Gospel writer takes. I suggest that you make that comparison this afternoon. While many of us

have heard the story so many times, it is always faith-building for us to hear it again in its full context.

In some Lutheran churches, this Sunday is called Passion Sunday and the entire Passion is read as the Gospel. The story begins with the Palm Sunday reading and continues through the death and burial of Jesus. This practice helps focus on the events of the entire week and prepares us to grow in piety and humility as it culminates in death and burial.

In my English literature classes in high school and college, before the invention of microchips, microcomputers, and microwaves, I was taught to look for deeper meaning in a piece of literature. I was challenged to uncover the background behind the passages in the writing. To uncover the symbolism used by the author in the work. To look at the location and events surrounding the plotline. To recognize the motives and intents of each character. On a small scale that is the purpose of my sermon today. Now, for some of you, this is new learning. For some, this is a review. For all of us, it is necessary that our faith be revitalized and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through, and by whom, this story comes to life through death for us.

Jesus and His disciples arrived on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives after their climb up the Roman road from Jericho. According to St. John, they arrived in Bethany. It was Friday, March 27. They camped in Bethany during Holy Week until Jesus' arrest on Thursday night. Bethany was the home of Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, who Jesus had just raised from death. The raising of Lazarus was the lynchpin for the decision by the High Priest Caiaphas to call the Sanhedrin together and make the decision to get rid of Jesus. God acted through him as was foretold in Isaiah.

Since travel was not permitted on the Sabbath, Jesus spent Saturday, March 28th, in Bethany, and in the evening after the Sabbath was over, He had dinner with His friends. At this dinner, Mary anointed Jesus with about 11 ounces of expensive nard oil imported from

India. This act pointed to the death and burial of Jesus. Judas complained that this was a waste of money and the oil should have been sold. It presents the image of the disciple who was so materialistic that in a few days his love of money would lead to the betrayal of his friend for 30 pieces of silver.

Great crowds, mostly Galileans, accompanied Jesus as they all traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover in obedience to Jewish religious obligation. Many of these Galileans also camped in the area around Bethany before going to the city and Temple, since Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a walled city and normally could house only about 25, 000 people. It was customary that the excess crowds which could number into the hundreds of thousands spent the nights before the Passover outside the walls in places like Bethany and the next town, Bethpage. Jews were expected to be ritually clean before celebrating the Passover as directed by Numbers. For that reason, most Jews arrived a week before the actual date of the Passover to prepare themselves ritually for the celebration of this highest Jewish observation.

On Sunday, March 29th, Jesus made His decision to present Himself to the City of Jerusalem. Although Jesus previously had made every effort to remain inconspicuous and had demanded that His disciples do the same, on this Sunday, for the first time in His ministry, He purposefully brings attention to Himself. Mathew spends several verses telling us that Jesus sought out a donkey as His means of transportation. In 1st Century Palestine, most people, except the wealthy, walked everywhere. At no other time in any of the Gospels prior to this Sunday, March 27th, Palm Sunday, do we ever read that Jesus rode on an animal anywhere. Jesus was recreating the return of King David to Jerusalem in peace and humility (2 Samuel 19-20) and the entrance of Solomon into Jerusalem for His enthronement (1 Kings 1:38-40); Old Testament rulers rode donkeys in Israel during times of peace. (Judg. 5:10; 1 Kings 1:33). This was a sign of their humble service to the people. Warriors rode horses. By coming in peace, Jesus was preparing to declare His messiahship by fulfilling

this messianic prophecy. He was extending grace rather than judgment to the city. He was coming as a servant now. He will return as a conquering King riding on a warhorse in the future as we read in Revelation 19:11. Jesus was exhibiting His royal majesty as the Son of God and His purposeful fulfillment of the prophetic words of Isaiah 62:11 (Say to the daughter of Zion, Behold Your salvation comes) and Zechariah 9:9 ***“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”***

The response of the crowd of Passover pilgrims was one of celebration and exhilaration. After hearing, seeing, and following Jesus’ ministry, miraculous signs, and even the ability to overcome demons and death, many of them were now convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. The Messiah that had been promised by God for all of Biblical history. The Messiah who was to be their King. One of their responses to Jesus was to wave date "palm" fronds (i.e., "branches"). The waving palms fronds had become a common practice at national celebrations in Israel (dating back to the Festival of Booths in Leviticus 23:40.) “Palm” fronds had become a symbol of nationalistic hope. They appeared on the coins that the Jewish nationalists produced during the war with the Romans in A.D. 66-70. When the people used them on this occasion, they signaled the popular belief that Israel’s Messiah had appeared (we read the same usage in Rev. 7:9). *(Please lift up your palm fronds and wave them now as if you were in the adoring crowd.)* The palm fronds you are waving are symbols of life and salvation. Waving them for Jesus was and is now fully appropriate because He brought life and salvation. You may put them down. (Or continue to wave them as you wish.) Unlike you, the people on the road to Jerusalem did not know the true meaning of their actions. A second response by the crowd was to throw down their outer garments on the road for Jesus to travel over. This act too was symbolic as well, referenced in 2 Kings 9: 13, when the subjects of Jehu removed their outer garments and declared Him as their king. The third response was in the verbal

responses of the people. The people's words of praise came from Psalm 118:25-26. Jews used this psalm at the Passover as part of **"the great Hallel"** (Psalms. 113—118) and at the feasts of Tabernacles and Dedication. *"Hosanna"* transliterates the Hebrew word for **"Save us now!"** (cf. 2 Sam. 14:4; 2 Kings 6:26). It had become an acclamation through usage (cf. Rev. 7:10). They shouted *"Son of David"* which was the messianic title that stressed the kingly role that Messiah would play. The words, *"He who comes in the name of the Lord"* are also a reference to the Messiah. **"Hosanna in the highest"** probably meant **"Glory to God in the highest"** (as found in Luke 2:14). You remember that from the angelic heralds singing to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. Quoting this passage voiced praise to God for sending the Messiah and cried out to Him for deliverance.

In all these responses, the enthusiastic and adoring crowd of people were acclaiming Jesus as being a blessed Messiah and He let them do it. However, this is the twist in the plot of this whole story. Even though Jesus was their King and ours, He was their spiritual King. He was and is a Suffering Servant (just as was foretold in Isaiah 52-53). But, like Jesus' disciples, the impassioned crowds did not understand His role and what was to become His Passion of suffering and dying for all of us. And they did not appreciate the universal scope of His kingdom, in contrast, to their narrow view of a nation.

Jesus probably entered the City of Jerusalem through the Sheep's Gate. This gate was on the east wall of the city just to the north of the temple. It had that name because worshippers brought their sacrificial sheep through this gate being the closest one to the temple. How symbolic that the Lamb of God should enter through this portal. Matthew writes that the whole city was stirred up with this clamorous arrival of Jesus sitting humbly on a donkey being borne along by an adoring crowd. The people of the City of Jerusalem had probably heard about Jesus. Many of them had been in Bethany consoling Mary and Martha when Jesus came and raised the brother Lazarus from death. Yet, the irony of this is the residents

of Jerusalem asked, **"Who is this?"** despite the clamor of the crowds. They were told this was a **"prophet from Nazareth,"** whose arena of ministry had been mainly **"Galilee."** Galilee – a backwater area. Galileans who were from the far north were essentially foreigners in Jerusalem, and Jesus' entourage, made up of Galileans, stands out as another reason for a haughty response from the snobbish Jerusalem residents of the city. Poor bedraggled country bumpkins come to town with a local hero and calling him their Savior!

The Temple leaders, the High Priest, Pharisees, scribes knew who Jesus was. They hated Him. They correctly saw that He had to be sacrificed for the good of the whole city to keep the peace that He represented riding on a donkey. But ironically, the sacrifice they intended was not theological but political. Jesus' death would save the people from death. He was the sacrifice of one for the many based on Jesus' own words in Matthew 20:29. But the religious and political leaders saw His sacrifice as salvation from a potential Roman slaughter of the people and so Jesus would save the people but not in the way God intended. He would also save them and their positions of authority and power in God's Temple.

And lastly, the Roman soldiers. They must have scoffed at this rag-tag procession with a docile man riding on a donkey attended by these foreign people singing something they couldn't understand and didn't care to know as long as things didn't get out of hand and cause a riot. What a spectacle, not like their world where heroes came on chariots or stallions through triumphal arches.

The whole of Biblical writing had come to this. Jesus was coming to be the Deliverer. The Savior. The Redeemer of His people and all these people, the characters of the story present a different view and competing storylines each with their own endings. God, the author of the story. He started to write it in the Garden of Eden where our story begins. Jesus made His entrance just as God had planned since that day in the Garden of Eden when Satan introduced evil, sin, and death into the perfect world that God had created as Good. Even though our Good God has told the story through His

prophets and Old Testament writers to the people of Jesus' time, the people of Jerusalem, Judah, and all of Israel, and to us. They should have recognized the plot with the main character, Jesus. They did not. They misinterpreted the symbolism and the idea of the story completely. They were too wrapped up in their own story. They didn't see the truth that was right in front of their eyes and had been told to them for centuries. A lesson for us.

Like any well-written story, the author appeals to the emotions of the hearer. That is the case in this Holy Week story, at the beginning of this story, today, we are uplifted and jubilant. This is a day of celebration in which Jesus is worshipped and praised as the King of Kings. But as the story proceeds, the Holy Week script plays out in the Gospel story as if it were a made-for-TV movie or a play (that was those events with live actors that we used to attend). The Holy Week script is full of little scenarios that draw appeal to our spiritual and actual emotions. But, unlike the many stories, we watch for entertainment. This story is not fictional. It is real. It is the story of our salvation. Our redemption. It was real and glorious and tragic. It demonstrates love and passion. It causes our hearts to ache. It has a surprise ending that takes our breath away and serves to restore it. What a story this week tells!

The Holy Week Story was written, produced, and directed by God Himself. He was the star of the story in Jesus. Without His own power of the Holy Spirit, this Holy Week story is flat and somewhat hackneyed. A popular guy gets arrested for something he didn't do. He refuses to admit his guilt even after suffering police brutality in interrogation. He goes to court, even has an appeal, and is judged guilty. Then, he is sentenced to death and dies. What kind of story is that? It's as if someone took our news and strung together a set of clips for a plot. But this story is from God. God used the Gospel writers who were the eyewitnesses to write the story for us. God was telling us this story that we might understand the depth of His love and the depth of sacrifice He was making through Jesus for us. We all know the story of the Triumphal Entry today and the stories

which will unfold during this Holy Week. God expects us to look deeper into each episode, each individual scene, each character, each setting, and their background to see the deeper meaning that is found beyond the actual story. Just as I have started to do in the homily this morning. There is more even to this episode, but we are now moving on and you have the storybook to read yourself. You have the power of the Holy Spirit to give you the insight and wisdom to see the truth in the Words of God during this Holy Week and its story. God caused this story to be written for you and for me. He wanted us to know Him and His love. He wanted us to see the true meaning of salvation through His dearly beloved Son and He especially wanted us to believe that the Story was and is our Salvation to eternal life in Him.

On this Palm Sunday, we are beginning our Salvation Story and with the pilgrims coming to Passover so long ago, we need to sing our Songs of Praise, Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who came, who comes, and will come again, we believe this because of this story, again. Hosanna in the Highest – To God be the glory and to Jesus, His Son. Amen.