

Palm Sunday/ Sunday of the Passion
Jesus Rides into Your Life and Mine

Today is a day with not just one, but two Gospel readings.

The one I just read is called the Processional or Palm Sunday Gospel, from Matthew, 21. The other one, from Matthew 26 and 27, covers the whole drama of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In other words, the whole story of Holy Week.

Some congregations have taken this longer section and use it on Palm Sunday as dramatic reading, with different speaking parts: parts for the crowd, for the disciples, and for each character.

If you've experienced a Palm Sunday like that it's almost like hearing and seeing a three act play. There can be value in doing that, but it can also send the message that you've already seen the whole play.

If you've seen Act 1, 2, and 3 on Sunday, why come back on Thursday and Friday?

So today, I want to do something about that.

I want you to think of Palm Sunday as Act 1, Maundy Thursday as Act 2 and Good Friday as Act 3. The journey with Jesus, to the cross, has three significant parts.

It's a journey that's hard to travel. And there's a part of all of us that resists taking it.

But the power of Jesus' resurrection, the whole meaning of Easter, is not the same, without experiencing the depth of Jesus' love on the cross.

And the story of that love, begins today with Act 1: with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Jesus' hour has now come. Now in Act 1, he has entered Jerusalem and the drama has begun. Jerusalem was full of crowds gathered for the Passover festival. And many who were gathered had come from Galilee, the same region where Jesus had been traveling and doing his ministry.

Many had seen and heard Jesus teaching. And many had witnessed Jesus miraculous healings:

- lepers who were cleansed of their disease
- people who were crippled and lame who could now walk
- and many who had been blind, but now could see

So, it's no wonder that news about Jesus had spread rapidly and "the whole city of Jerusalem was in turmoil." They were buzzing with questions about this man named Jesus.

And the key question that was on everyone's lips was, "Who is this?"

"Who is this man, who is doing these great miracles?"

"Is he a great prophet?"

"Is he the promised Messiah? The King who will overthrow the Romans?"

They wanted to know.

Well, this question about Jesus' identity and his mission is really at the very heart of this Palm Sunday Gospel. The drama of Palm Sunday, is this underlying conflict between the earthly expectations of the crowds in Jerusalem and the reality that Jesus came to be a different kind of king a servant king.

In John's Gospel we catch a glimpse of this early on.

In chapter six, right after Jesus had fed the 5000, John writes this:

“After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again into the hills by himself.”¹

In other words, Jesus had resisted their attempts to recognize him as the Messiah.

But now this mysterious traveling minister, had entered Jerusalem.

And this time when the people greeted Jesus as their Messiah, singing, “Hosanna to the King of David” Jesus accepted the title.

And when Jesus accepted this greeting, that came from Psalm 118, the crowds went wild.

People began to cut Palm branches from the trees and lay them on the road.

this was another symbol with a deeper meaning.

You see palm branches, believe it or not, had political overtones.

People carried them when the temple was liberated from the Syrians in 164 BC

and when the Jerusalem citadel was retaken from enemies in 142 BC.

For these people in Jerusalem, Palm branches symbolized kingship, victory, and nationalism.

But here is where the drama of that First Palm Sunday took an unexpected turn.

Jesus certainly rode into Jerusalem in majesty, but what the crowd did not know was that Jesus was on his way to the cross.

As soon as the crowds found out that Jesus was not the national hero who would overthrow the Romans, as soon as they saw him arrested and appear helpless before the Jewish leaders and Pilate, they turned on him.

What they had missed on Palm Sunday was a sign Jesus had given them, when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. In that day, a warrior king would ride into the city on a war horse.

But a king on a mission of peace would ride an unbroken or ritually clean donkey.

The prophecy Jesus was fulfilling was recorded in Zechariah, chapter 9,

“Look your king is coming to you, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”²

In this act, Jesus was making clear his identity. His mission was one of peace. His kingdom was not of this world. He was redefining for the people...what kind of Messiah, God had sent.

¹ John 6:14-15

² Zechariah 9:9

And this is the part of the drama where you and I come in. Instead of hearing the story from the distance of 2000 years, I want you to ask yourself, "Where am I in this drama?"

This drama is not only about the people in Jerusalem, who waved the Palm branches 2000 years ago, it is also about us. This Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, rides into each of our lives.

The mission that took him to Jerusalem, was not only for the people of that day but for people of all places and all times. And so in this drama, we are not spectators, we are not members of the audience, we are in the story. We are involved in this drama, because Jesus came to die for your sins and mine.

At the beginning of today's service we read together these words in our Litany for Palm Sunday, "What began as words of praise, soon turned to cries of "crucify him." In other words, our sin easily drown out our praise. This story is about us.

The good news, is that right into the midst of our sin rides one who is able to save us and redeem us. Jesus comes to us "in the name of the Lord," in the name of our consistently compassionate, promise-keeping God.

The good news for us, is that God's love does not waver, and the power of the cross does not fade. The Apostle Paul reminds us that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

That's the love we discover when we follow Jesus, when we see how he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

As we move now into the drama of the week ahead, let us keep our eyes on Jesus. From the waving of Palm Branches as Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, to His suffering and death on the cross, God was at work, unfolding His plan of salvation for the world.

This week may the God of Good Friday and Easter, bring you from death to life. Amen