

Zechariah 9:9-12
Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 11:1-11
Psalm 118

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
March 24, 2024
The Rev. Karen Haig

Today is a day unlike any other we experience together. Today we leave our Lenten journey behind and begin the walk through Holy Week and Easter. We'll feel the change right here in this service as we move from waving palms and shouts of Hosanna to shouts of Crucify him, crucify him! ...something we never, ever thought we would say. We begin this Palm and Passion Sunday with Spirits high. Whether we've kept up with our Lenten practices, or lost track of them altogether, we've come through Lent and we're well on our way to Easter! Finally, today is the day Jesus rides victorious in to town, having spent three years preaching and teaching some wild truths – the truth that God's kingdom really could come, that peace and justice really could prevail and that love really is the only law that matters.

"Hosanna in the highest," the people cried, as they celebrated what they seemed to think was a mighty king, the long-awaited anointed one who would wipe out the bad guys and make everything right again. The people at that Palm Sunday parade had waited a very long time for the promised Messiah, and they thought they had a pretty good idea of who he would be. They expected a mighty King, one who would occupy the throne of David even more powerfully than King David himself had done. They had been expecting a very particular sort of Messiah, the Mighty Messiah of their own imaginings. That's why they were yelling *"Hosanna."* Do you know what that means? It doesn't mean "Yay Jesus! It means "Save Us!" "Save NOW!" This cry of desperation came right alongside the hope of a different future, the dream of a better world, the heartfelt desires of a people who had lived too long in occupied territory, a people who had all but given up hope. We know those feelings too, don't we? The dream of a better world, nestled right up next to real life, and a real world that can sometimes break our hearts and our spirits. And still, even in the midst of all our Good Fridays, resurrection and redemption are always coming.

When Jesus decided to leave his home and his life in sleepy Galilee, when he decided to head for the big city where people were unpredictable and not so hospitable, decided to come to Jerusalem at the craziest time of the year, the time when every faithful Jew who could, packed up and made a pilgrimage to the Temple in order to observe the Passover and make sacrifices to their God, I am quite sure he knew what he was doing, knew the chaos that was about to ensue. Something very unsettling was happening, and it made the authorities nervous.

So nervous in fact, that in this particular year, the governor over all of Rome, a man called Pontius Pilate, moved his royal headquarters from the sea to the city, just to keep an eye on things. He and all his military might paraded into town at the height of the Passover celebration to ensure the Jewish pilgrims knew who was in charge. Sure, the people were allowed their Passover celebration of freedom from slavery in Egypt, but if there was any sign of rebellion against their Roman occupiers, Pilate's army would eradicate it, and them.

It must have been a surprise for Pilate and his armies to come upon that messy, rag-tag parade of people celebrating a make-shift king, a messiah who rode into town on his convictions that showed up in the form of a donkey rather than a mighty steed. Jesus wasn't the first king to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, you know. King David's son Solomon had done the same thing. In the ancient Middle Eastern world, leaders rode horses into battle, in defiance of the people. Leaders who came in peace, rode donkeys.¹ We heard it in the Old Testament reading this morning, did you notice it? *Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations...* The mighty king the people expected simply didn't show up. Jesus wasn't even dressed as well as the people who had come to cheer him on. There was no crown, there were no weapons, and there certainly was no military to insure his victory throughout the land. The people who came for the great parade had come thinking they would usher in a mighty warrior super-hero king. It's tempting to make Jesus into a superhero, but there's something very wrong with that, because that isn't who Jesus was, or is. Listen... *Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Jesus entered into Jerusalem knowing full well that he was to die a terrible death – there was no more terrible death than death on a cross. And there was no death more demeaning. The cross was saved for the lowest of the low enemies of the state. And that is, I think, probably the point. In hanging on that cross, just as the lowest of the low on either side of him hung on their own crosses, Jesus made a very clear statement about who God is. That's important for us to think about. We hold the cross as the symbol of our faith, and the cross is the image of the lowest of the low.

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The temptation to make Jesus into a super-hero, particularly in the amazing drama that is the last week of his life, is very, very strong. We want to revel in the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, waving our palms and shouting *Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!* And then we want to go back to work and back to school and back to the ordinariness of our lives and skip straight through to Easter, when we can join another parade, this time shouting Alleluia, He is risen! But oh my dears, what a poverty it is not to immerse ourselves in everything that happens in between the Hosannas and the Alleluias.

I understand our reluctance to walk with Jesus through this last and most holy week of his life. There is enough suffering in the "real world" - we don't want to go through suffering for the sake of suffering. And if it were suffering for the sake of suffering, I wouldn't go either. But none of Jesus life, and not even his death was for the sake of suffering. It was all for the sake of love. For

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/king-ride-donkey.html>

love of God and love of us. Each one of us. It was for the love of this very community, just as much as it was for the love of his father and his mother and the disciples and all those people he had walked with throughout his too-short life.

When we make the journey through holy week together, when we allow ourselves to fully enter into each one of the beautiful and moving liturgies, we will come to the Easter resurrection filled with a joy that is unimaginable to those who came directly from the Palm Sunday parade. Don't wait until next Sunday to come back! Come to church tonight for the service of Tenebrae to ritually experience the victory of light over darkness. Come back Tuesday morning to sit in silent, centering prayer and be anointed for the journey ahead. Come back Tuesday night to immerse yourself in contemplation, beautiful music, and the opportunity to offer up all your hurts and heartaches to the God who loves you more than life itself, in our service of healing and reconciliation.

Bring your whole family on Maundy Thursday when we will have supper together, sharing communion at table with our friends just as Jesus did on that last night with his. Hear his words as he reminds us that unless we humble ourselves enough to let him wash our feet, we can have no part in him. Come to the garden, hear the story of his arrest, stay with him through the night to keep watch.

And don't be afraid to come back on Friday, that most difficult day we call "good..." You will feel the greatest love of all that day, palpable in the story of the God who chose to experience every single aspect of what it is to be human.

And, when with God's friends, we have walked alongside Jesus, feeling the love of deep friendship, the heartache of betrayal, the seeming loss of everything that is good, we will come to the Easter Vigil knowing that God is in absolutely everything with us and that love always, always wins. Our Easter Vigil is for the whole family! Bring your kids and your grandkids in their jammies, gather around the fire, hear the ancient stories, bring noisemakers and happy hearts as we experience the thrill of the very first Eucharist of Easter. The joy of resurrection experienced in the Easter Vigil is like nothing else.

The events of Holy Week are not easy. They weren't easy for Jesus and his friends, and they aren't easy for us. Yet Holy Week embodies all of our questions, all of our suffering, all of our heartaches and all of our joy. Holy Week helps us to see God at work in every aspect of our lives, not waving a magic wand to disappear the sadness, but making meaning out of everything we experience and turning everything, finally, into love.

You see, God isn't with us only on Sundays. In Holy Week, just as in every other week of our very real lives, God is present and calling and loving and making meaning in all of the Monday through Saturday in-between times too. Join us on the journey and find your place in God's great story. Walk with Jesus through this last week of his life. It's a journey like no other, and it just might change you forever. Come with us. Because the journey is how you know. Amen

