

# From Palms to Passion

## *Matthew 21:1-11*

Over the years I have loved Palm Sunday. The cheering crowds. The waving of the palm fronds, the joyous singing, shouting *Hosanna!* It brings back childhood memories of church, where sometimes, to a kid, Palm Sunday seemed like a bigger deal than Easter. But one of the hazards of preaching is that you have to read and study the Bible – and even take it seriously.

This is a strange scene, isn't it? Picture it with me: a man is riding down the road on a donkey, surrounded by a delirious crowd. Men, women and children alike are singing and dancing, throwing their coats and olive branches on the road in front of the donkey. And they are chanting. To us, it looks like a crowd at an outdoor rock concert, or fans lined up to welcome a celebrity arriving for a local premier. But wait, what is it they are saying? Hosanna? Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord? Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David? Hosanna in the highest heaven? What do they mean? Is there more going on here than the usual celebrity chasing?

The people in the crowd knew there was more at stake than the arrival of a sports icon or Hollywood diva. They recognized an epiphany procession when they saw one. All the elements were evident that morning — an honored king or dignitary riding on an animal, loyal followers smoothing the road by covering it with branches and even their coats, people cheering and singing praise to their hero. But something is amiss here, something not quite right with the scene.

Yes, the crowds recognized Jesus as a king. But, that was about all they got right that day. The throng wanted a king that would physically overthrow the Romans and establish an earthly, political reign. But Jesus had no such intentions. For Jesus, the donkey signified kingship, but also humility - it was the beast of burden. His ride was a living sermon, but the people missed the point of the illustration. Jesus was symbolically speaking out against not only Roman rule but also against the privileged attitude of the high priests who worked in collaboration with their foreign oppressors. It was Jesus' hope that Israel would be a servant people, driven by neither Roman nor Hebrew imperialism. It was his hope that they live out the kingdom of God in their midst. He had been teaching about what that meant for three years, but the crowds still missed the point.

Thousands of people were flooding into Jerusalem that week. Many were making that once-in-a-lifetime journey to celebrate Passover in the temple in the Holy City. It was a time of great rejoicing, of remembering when God had liberated the people from the oppression of Pharaoh. Jerusalem was the place where people came to be in the presence of God. Jesus had no such expectations for this week. He knew where this donkey ride would eventually take him. For some time now, he had been trying to tell his followers that this week would be like no other.

But even the disciples, those who had lived and walked with Jesus for three years, didn't get it. At least, not yet.

Our Lord's arrival in Jerusalem just five days before his crucifixion is one of the few stories that is reported by all of the Gospel writers. Everybody remembers that day. But as you might expect, they each seem to remember it a little differently. Luke, for example, doesn't mention anything about the palms. If his were the only account we had, we probably wouldn't even call today "Palm Sunday." Matthew, on the other hand, remembers the palms, but then adds the detail that Jesus came riding in on both a donkey and a colt.

The one thing they all agree upon, however, is that it was a joyful and glorious day, a time of great excitement, optimism, and renewed national pride for the Israelites. Indeed, what begins with a handful of disciples offering their praise to God practically turns into a citywide celebration. And one can appreciate why. After all, the people of Jerusalem had been waiting for something like this for a long time. Five hundred years earlier, Zechariah had announced that one day their king would arrive "*triumphant and victorious*" (Zech. 9:9)—and that ancient prophecy was indelibly etched in the mind of this glory-starved nation.

So when Jesus decides that it's time for the city's most anticipated parade, the people are more than ready to let the party begin. They line the streets, cheering wildly and lifting their voices in song: "*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*" (Mk. 11:9-10). Some in the crowd may well have compared Jesus to Judas Maccabeus, who had driven the Greeks out of Jerusalem 150 years earlier, and no doubt, there are those who believe that's precisely what Jesus now intends to do. Their hope is that he will launch a revolution against the Romans and release the Holy City from pagan occupation.

Still, if the truth be told, all of their loud hosannas can't hide the fact that Jesus is a good deal less than what they expected. Judas Maccabeus had arrived on a white stallion. Our Lord arrives on this little donkey that almost leaves his feet dragging on the ground. Plus, there is no conqueror's weapon attached to his saddle. In fact, he doesn't even have a saddle, only somebody's old overcoat. Jesus doesn't fit their messianic profile at all. And sure enough, within a week, the grand marshal of this tiny parade will be carried out of town after having died in their hands.

Fred Craddock once referred to Palm Sunday as "false Easter." He's borrowing that phrase, of course, from the expression "false spring." But I think he may be on to something. False spring is when the sun comes out for several days and the ground is warmed, so that the flowers begin to push their way up through the soil. Fresh new buds appear on the trees, and when you look out the window, hungry robins have descended upon your lawn searching for worms. "We made it through another winter," you think to yourself. "We can put away the heavy jackets and the gloves. Spring has arrived."

And then comes a blast of cold air. The temperature suddenly drops and the weather people start talking about the possibility of snow again. Bring out the winter coats again. We experienced it this year. It was "false spring."

Craddock suggests that today is a bit like that. Here we have brightly colored bulletins and glorious, sang joyful music and waved our palm branches. It does seem a little like Easter, doesn't it?

But as you well know, in a couple of days, there's going to be a cold blast from the centers of power in Jerusalem— both religious and political. The nights will suddenly grow dark and lonely. One of Jesus' friends will betray him, another will deny him, and the rest will end up abandoning him. Within the week, he will be condemned, crucified, dead, and buried. Today is not Easter. It's "false Easter."

Now, since that's the case, don't you think that somebody ought to tell these people that their parade is premature? Because, evidently they don't have a clue as to what is about to happen. They're so enthusiastic and excited. However, it's not Easter yet. They're just going to wind up being disappointed. Don't you think we ought to tell them?

But then again, who are we to tell them to be quiet? To be sure, the kind of Messiah they are expecting, and the kind of Messiah Jesus actually is, are not the same thing. And yet, are they not right to greet him as a king? Because even though his kingship will not be one of might, it will be one of mercy. He won't release the people from Roman occupation or take revenge upon their enemies, but he will redeem them.

As the week wore on, it seems they still couldn't grasp what was happening. The scribes and the Pharisees kept questioning Jesus, looking for ways to trap him and arrest him. Jesus spoke more frequently about his own suffering and death. By Thursday, when the disciples gathered to celebrate the Passover, tension was high. After supper, Judas slipped out into the night and betrayed the Lord. As Jesus continued his journey toward the cross, he journeyed alone. One by one the crowds and then the disciples fell away, until just one male disciple and a few faithful women remained at the cross. After the crucifixion, they all ran and hid away in the upper room, confused and afraid. How quickly the tide had turned. The cheering crowds and the new ruler entering the Holy City on a donkey seemed but a distant memory.

Fascinating story, you may be thinking, but what does all of this have to do with us? Where do we find ourselves in this unusual narrative? As Christians, we have gathered across the world today to celebrate Palm Sunday. It is easy to see ourselves as part of the cheering crowd. We have entered our sanctuaries singing our songs of praise to the Lord. This is a good thing. Luke tells us that it is our duty to give praise to God. If we don't, he proclaims, the very rocks will cry out.

But some of us find that we are like the disciples. Despite Jesus' continued teaching about the cost of discipleship and the price of following, we still don't understand what he is asking of us.

We can't get past our own preconceived ideas to grasp what following really means. Perhaps it is time for us to really listen to the core of the Gospel message.

It's difficult to focus on just this Palm Sunday passage when you know the whole story. I have often wondered how a crowd could so completely reverse its mood. They went from shouts of "Hosanna" to "crucify him" in just a very few days. Perhaps we should withhold our judgment on their fickleness for a bit.

Jesus did give them something new to think about. That Sabbath evening, he went to the temple and looked around. But the next morning he came back to the temple, where he had sat and talked as a respected rabbi. He came back with a whip and cleaned house. He attacked that which was sacred - the temple, the place where God dwelled. Imagine! You welcome a guest; he stays for the night, then comes back the next day and vandalizes your home. Now you see him as he is and you don't like it.

Palm Sunday is not a day when we throw up our hands because Jesus was killed. It's not a day of pessimism because the crowds later became ugly. Palm Sunday, rather, is a day when we say, knowing all of this, knowing that people are fickle, get tired of parades and go home, knowing that powerful leaders like things neat and tidy and kill reformers, knowing that the humble truth teller is walked upon, knowing that people will sell their soul for a handful of silver, knowing that even good friends will sleep while we suffer, it's a day when knowing all of this, we remember the day that Jesus came riding into town on a borrowed donkey, and the crowds cheered, and we praise God.

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