

## Sermon: Humble and Triumphant

Seth C. Burgess, seminarian  
Sunday, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
10:00am Worship  
Lyons First Presbyterian Church  
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

### Scripture for Palm Sunday<sup>1</sup>

*Psalm 118*  
*Matthew 21:1-11*  
*Philippians 2:5-11*

Pronunciation hint: *Bethphage*<sup>2</sup> (beth-fuh-gee)

### ***Jesus in Jerusalem***

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, and the beginning of the end of the Lenten season. This is an important time for us—this most special week of the Christian calendar. Over the short course of our annual commemoration of Holy Week, we experience the full range of movement defining the central beliefs of the Christian faith, that God so loved the world that Jesus came into it on our behalf<sup>3</sup>—to redeem God’s creation—and that Jesus died for us, rose for us, and now reigns in power for us<sup>4</sup>—administering unending grace in a world and for a people who despite all the accomplishments of civilized society, always depend on God for what matters most.

In a Holy Week carefully remembered, we will begin it on Palm Sunday with special joy, with the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem to a crowd eagerly anticipating his arrival, but amidst a city center that ultimately was not ready to understand who he was. This carries us later in the week to a period of deep sadness, a dark time in which Jesus is betrayed on Maundy Thursday, sentenced to death as a criminal on Good Friday, and that same day cruelly hung on a cross until the breath of this world is drained out of him. And then we return to joy on Easter, an incomparable joy which fuels our faith and shapes our lives as Christians. Holy Week was and is God’s love explained for us, defines our faith, and helps us to know better who God is and who we are.

### ***Triumph***

We remember Palm Sunday as a triumphant celebration, because in all four Gospel accounts we are given a very similar narrative describing a scene that has all the elements of a joyous parade—a procession of sorts. And probably all of us here have attended and experienced parades and homecomings, as well as processions.

Take a moment to picture such events you have attended, and to envision the way special individuals are presented or received. Think about a village mayor, smiling and waving from the

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<sup>1</sup> Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, April 9, 2017, Palm Sunday (Year A),

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/4/9/>

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:1

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:34

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backseat of a convertible. Think about military veterans, their service long behind them, but our honoring of their sacrifice frequently remembered. Think about the the royal court of a school prom. In each of those events, we see the individuals in a special light, and receive them in various degrees of cheer and triumph.

There's another scene for us to picture as well, that may help us to deepen our experience of a triumphant entrance on a special day. If you are married, or ever have been, put yourself back into the earliest moments of the ceremony, when traditionally the groom looks up and sees the bride for the first time of that day, dazzling in a white dress. If you have not been in that moment yourself, hold on to the same scene, and imagine what it might be like to be in either set of wedding shoes—just for this sequence of events during the bridal processional. The bride is shining with beauty, radiant. She knows it, and everyone is looking at her. But the bride and groom are only looking at each other. The bride is taking slow and deliberate, graceful steps, simultaneously smiling and crying, escorted by a person who has been responsible for her well being up to that point in life, in one way or another. The groom's heart is beating with anticipation, and perhaps a tinge of nervousness. He wonders what has brought him to this moment, how something so wonderful has come to be happening. Upon reaching the altar of marriage, the bridal procession concludes with the giving away of the bride, knowing that what comes next is the symbolic giving of love and life, one for another.

It is relevant for all of us to sense the emotion present in a bridal procession, because in the final week of Jesus' life, we are in that moment with him. On Palm Sunday, our triumph is that Jesus is coming down the aisle for us.

In the Gospel history of Jesus entering Jerusalem, the language of Scripture is not yet one where Christ is described as the bridegroom, and the church his bride. Paul gives us that later in his letters to churches throughout the Mediterranean. But it is such a strong language that we, having the benefit of all of the New Testament—we might also borrow from it to imagine the procession of Jesus on Palm Sunday to enhance our emotion as we remember the start of Holy Week. We are creatively flipping the roles of Christ and church just temporarily (with Jesus as the bride and the church as the groom), because of the way we experience wedding ceremonies in our American culture... but it is the washing over of a feeling of committed love that is important. On the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus was entering into a scene where he was ultimately declaring his love and commitment for people, which we know lasts not only until the end of life on this earth, but forever.

### ***Humility***

The triumphant entrance of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is most unlike other processions of that time, two thousand years ago. In the Roman Empire, "entry processions were important occasions. Whether a general, governor, official, or emperor, they displayed Roman political

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and military power.”<sup>5</sup> But Jesus’ entrance made a mockery of this Roman standard, by riding not on a warhorse, but a colt—a humble animal, and even one so young as to have not yet been proven capable of carrying a human passenger. Picture the contrast of a military or government official parading into a city on a proud high-stepping steed versus a man dressed in common clothes, atop a donkey, perhaps moving unsteadily under the weight of an unfamiliar load.

The text of Matthew 21:6-9 tells us that

*The disciples... led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, “Hosanna to David’s son!” “Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!” “Hosanna in highest heaven!”<sup>6</sup>*

What was the point of Jesus choosing a donkey to ride into Jerusalem? It was to highlight **how** he was coming, and addressing **what** he was about to do.

In the next verses of Matthew, it is given to us that

*As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, “What’s going on here? Who is this?”<sup>7</sup>*

We are no longer hearing about the response of Jesus’ followers, receiving him triumphantly. These are the expressions of the rest of Jerusalem, observing that Jesus has upturned the way a procession is supposed to happen. Jesus enters on a donkey because rather than parading into the city to be honored, he is entering in ministry, to fulfill the final week of his life on earth as the servant king.

In response to those disturbed by Jesus’ unorthodox and offensive arrival,

*“the parade crowd answered, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee.’<sup>8</sup>*

Jesus comes to confront Jerusalem, and knows how it will end for him. Christ’s entrance on Palm Sunday is not only triumphant—it is humble to the extent that leads to the Cross. On Palm Sunday we should remember that while we are joyful about what Jesus is about to do for us throughout the course of Holy Week—we should remember that it came about by humility

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<sup>5</sup> The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, pp. 1783-84

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 21:6-9, The Message (MSG),

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+21%3A1-11&version=MSG>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 21:10, MSG

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 21:11, MSG

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unparalleled by any other person in human history. God so loves the world, that Jesus entered into and remains in this life with us, both humble and triumphant.

### ***Proceed with Christ***

In our own lives, let us carry forward our remembrances of Holy Week. Let us remember that rather than proceeding into a place with an expectation to be served—to be held above others, to be met by eyes deferred to our presence—it would be far holier and more Christ-like to proceed into the world and into our relationships with others as a radiant bride, representatives of God's love in the world, ready to commit ourselves to confront injustice and serve in ministry, all the days of our lives.

Amen.