

“What Matters most: Staying focused on God’s Purpose for You”

Matthew 21:1-11

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It has been fun to participate in Jesus’ triumphant parade waving our palm branches, celebrating his glorious entry into Jerusalem. Now we are about to begin our Holy week. As we witnessed together during the procession today, Jesus came riding a donkey into Jerusalem. The crowd was jubilant welcoming Him as their Messiah and Savior. They called out waving their palm branches, “Hosanna to David’s son!”, “Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven.” The crowd had been desperately longing for a Messiah. Palm branches were their sign to honor him as their great liberator and Messiah. How might this story challenge us today? What does Palm/Passion Sunday mean in our lives? Let’s make it clear about our question. What really matters in the story. The purpose of the Palm/Passion story challenges us to be spiritually aware of Jesus’ desire and awakens us to know God’s purpose for our salvation. Let’s explore spiritual meaning of Palm/Passion Sunday.

The crowd didn’t understand what Jesus wanted to do for them. Our Scripture reading gives us a clear contrast between the crowd’s expectations and Jesus’ actual desire. They were in the same parade but had a totally different focus. Rethink the meaning of the palm branches. The jubilant crowd waved their palm branches shouting out, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Hosanna means “Save us, give us success!” Waving Palm branches was a traditional sign of welcoming an important person. But here it was somewhat paradoxical. The crowd wanted a Messiah like King David whose powerful leadership brought them prosperity, security and independence. But Jesus was going to die for them on the cross. Jesus and the crowd were dreaming two different visions. Can you imagine what thoughts lingered in Jesus’ mind at the moment of entering Jerusalem receiving this great welcome? The crowd waved their branches and threw garments down on the road, giving Jesus a royal welcome, but Jesus knew that it was not for him, but for meeting their expectations. Jesus would have the crowd understand and realize what really matters most in their lives. He wanted to tell them that it is not economic or political success, but spiritual connection with the presence of God. Did they get it? I want to share a story. Some of you might recall this story that I shared with you a while ago:

A concerned husband went to the doctor to talk about his wife. He says to the doctor, "Doctor, I think my wife is deaf because she never hears me the first time and always asks me to repeat things." "Well," the doctor

replied, "go home and tonight stand about 15 feet from her and say something to her. If she doesn't reply move about 5 feet closer and say it again. Keep doing this so that you'll get an idea about the severity of her deafness." Sure enough, the husband goes home and does exactly as instructed. He starts off standing about 15 feet from his wife in the kitchen as she is chopping some vegetables and says, "Honey, what's for dinner?" He hears no response. He moves about 5 feet closer and asks again. No reply. He moves 5 feet closer. Still no reply. He gets fed up and moves right behind her, about an inch away, and asks loudly, "Honey, what's for dinner?" She replies, "For the fourth time, vegetable stew!"

This is just hilarious humor but it has more that challenges our spiritual understanding. Are we carefully listening to God's speaking or are we like a deaf husband who has a hearing problem and doesn't get it but only complains. Do we really understand the purpose of Jesus, our Messiah's entry to Jerusalem? What really mattered to Jesus was not to focus on individual prosperity, but on God's deepest desire to awaken our souls, remind us of God's unconditional love, and restore spiritual your relationship with God. He committed his life and was willing to die on the cross to connect us to the love of God.

Jesus himself was God's gift to humanity as loving incarnated God. And the whole purpose of his life was to passionately minister to his people. This is our church's mission as well. He was ready to love people no matter what might happen to him. The disciples who betrayed him at the last moment were afraid of death, but Jesus forgave them. This crowd passionately welcomed Jesus, but they soon turned around and cursed him when they were disappointed in him. Notwithstanding, Jesus would embrace them. In the end of his ministry in Jerusalem, even though one of his loving disciples, Judas betrayed him for thirty silver coins, Jesus still loved Judas and paid the price by giving away his life on the cross.

The writer, Ando Shusaku in her novel, "The life of Jesus Christ" challenges us to think of the immediate audience of Jesus' last words on the cross and reflect how Jesus' forgiving words have powerfully impacted all humanity, especially his disciples who betrayed him. She pointed out that the disciples were not in the crowd at Calvary when their master was crucified. They were greatly disappointed in him and they left the day before he died on the cross. The disciples expected that Jesus Christ, their Messiah would save the people, but nothing happened on the cross when they realized that their Messiah died. They were crushed and lost faith in him. They scattered and returned to their homes. On their way homes, one of the disciples heard that Jesus last words,

“God, forgive them for they know not what they do” The people at Calvary passed on Jesus’ last word to the disciples from mouth to mouth. Finally these words reached out to the disciples. They realized that these were meant for them when the disciples heard that Jesus forgave them. This news touched their hearts, changed their minds and helped them restore their faith. They were so inspired and believed that Jesus was their Messiah. This powerful experience gave them courage and boldness so that they could dedicate their lives as faithful disciples to witness the love of God.

What Jesus did for our salvation was life-giving. That was what God chose to save us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "and that is the way, the only way, in which God can be with us and help us...Only a suffering God can help."¹ Rethink and discover the meaning of your palm branches. Jesus is willing to suffer for the people and you. Today God is coming to suffer with us! That’s the meaning of Palm Sunday.

Let’s look at Palm/Passion Sunday and Easter as a reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ passion and suffering. Let me share a reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ passion and suffering from Linda Loessberg-Zahl pastor at Epworth United Methodist Church in Berkeley.

Move through the crowds. Go to the holy place – connect with the presence of God always with you, and take your cues from God. Live out of the richness of the person God created you to be, to do the work God has given you to do. Step out on the faith that you have in God and the faith God has in you! Go in the name of the Lord, the One who created you, loves you, and leads you, through any day, any crowd!²

This would be Jesus’ deepest desire and love for all of us to know God’s ultimate purpose. During Holy Week, I hope that you will take a spiritual pause and realize how much you matter to God. Amen.

¹ Who Is This? Matthew 21:1-11 March 24, 2002 by The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad

² Ibid.