

Palm Sunday: “Your God is coming!”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 21:1-10

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Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

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It was fun to participate in Jesus’ triumphant parade waving our palm branches celebrating Jesus’ great entry into Jerusalem. Now we are about to begin a 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.” They had been desperately awaiting a Messiah who would save them from their bondage. Palm branches were a sign of honoring him as their great liberator and Messiah. While I was preparing this Sunday message, I kept pondering about two images: Jerusalem and Palm branches. What does Jerusalem look like in our modern context different from two thousand years ago? What do the palm branches mean to us in our lives? This morning, I invite us to see a different perspective on this Palm Sunday story. Just imagine that Jesus comes not bound by time making his trip to our modern world. The imagination raises two questions for us: What if Jesus comes not bound by time, where would he show up? Where will the celebration be? Who will be shouting out and welcoming him? If you bring your own branches today, what is your reason and hope to welcome Jesus as your Messiah and Savior?

Let’s begin with Jerusalem. Jesus already told his disciples before the trip to Jerusalem that he would be betrayed, sentenced to death and would be handed over to the Romans for mockery and torture, leading up to the Crucifixion. Jesus knew what would be happening. This trip into Jerusalem means that Jesus entered Jerusalem to give away his life. It was not for his glorious presence as a Messiah, but it would be the last mile of his life. It must have been a difficult week for Jesus. What brought Jesus into this city and why did He make up his mind to make this trip in spite of great danger? The jubilant crowd is a symbol of our ego and self-centeredness. The crowd wanted a Messiah like King David whose powerful leadership brought them prosperity, security and independence. We need to be aware that the jubilant crowd was not the only crowd in Jerusalem. The Bible also tells us that there were others who were asking, “What’s going on here? Who is this?” and Roman soldiers had no interest in this parade. These characters are metaphors for such as atheism, indifference, and wars in our world.

What about 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: People wanted to receive political and economic liberation for salvation, but Jesus wanted to give them salvation of their souls. People were eager to pursue a better life, but Jesus was going to die for them on the cross. Jesus and the crowd were dreaming two different visions. We have to acknowledge that we are all conditional in a sense. It is often our human nature to change our direction when the outcome differs from what we had expected or wanted. Can we 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 their expectation.

How did Jesus respond to the crowd’s demands? Our Scripture reading simply reminds us that Jesus was on the way, poised and ready, mounted on a donkey. It did not mean that Jesus was ready to receive glory, praise or expected a royal welcome from the crowd. Instead, Jesus 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 betrayed him for thirty silver coins, he still loved him, paying the price by giving away his life on the cross. Jesus was determined to share the love of God with people. Even though people misunderstood him, Jesus was willing to go on this new journey to Jerusalem. Jesus was keenly aware that the crowd looked to Him to be their Messiah and their Savior from their hardships, to bring them an economic and political salvation, but Jesus would challenge them to fulfill their salvation first by realizing the love of God. Jesus was willing to suffer for the people and you. Today God is coming to suffer with you!!

Please take your own time this week and ask this question for yourself: What truly can liberate us from the bondage of our life? Materialism has never made us satisfied, just increased our desires. Legalism would not satisfy our hunger for salvation. Jesus boldly entered Jerusalem and shared the love of God which carried acceptance, forgiveness and the hope of life eternal.

Let us go back to our first question: What if Jesus came riding into our time? Jesus comes riding into my broken life, yours and this broken world. How

can God save us from our hardships? How will Jesus give hope to the hopeless and rescue us from our despairing world? Only a suffering God can help us. This may sound strange to some of you, but this is what Jesus showed us and the crowd in this Holy Week. It was not what the world and the jubilant crowd expected. What Jesus did for our salvation was life-giving. That was what God chose to save us from our despair. Dietrich Bonhoeffer met a God he had never known while he was confined in Hitler's prison. "God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross," 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 Pastor James Mueller said, Jesus came to Jerusalem so the soldiers would win, the nails would win, the cross would win. He wanted to lose, so he gave up. The real scandal of Christian theology is that Jesus wanted sin to crush him rather than me, rather than you.²

Rethink and discover the meaning of your palm branches. What is your wish and hope to welcome Jesus as your Savior and Messiah? As we continue to journey a final week of Jesus' passion and suffering during this week, I hope and pray that you decide who will be your Savior and Messiah. May God's blessing be with you in this Holy week and in your life. Amen.

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

² Palm Sunday, April 9, 2006 (A sermon based on Matthew 21:1-11 (RCL) by James Mueller)