



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 25, 2018

PALM SUNDAY

MY HEART AS SANCTUARY, MY LIFE AS PRAYER

Why Are You Celebrating?

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

If I had been in that crowd parading down the road from Bethany to the Eastern Gate into Jerusalem, waving branches, spreading cloaks on the ground, chanting hosannas, and believing that something exciting was about to happen, I would have felt rather silly, if not downright stupid, when we reached the city and nothing happened. Nothing! Mark tells us that after all that hoopla, Jesus entered the city, went to the temple, looked around, and went back to Bethany. What a disappointment! What a let down! If you're going to have a parade, at least have a reason for a parade! Otherwise, why bother?

Imagine: this ragtag parade troupe marches through the Eastern Gate and the crowds part. The shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" die down and everyone turns to look at Jesus who, they expect, is going to speak. With all eyes in the crowded streets looking at him, Jesus slides off the colt he has been riding, gives it a friendly and grateful pat on the neck, and slips into the crowd and on to the temple. Stunned, the now quiet revelers look at one another, shrug, shake the dust out of their cloaks and start to head home. A friend of one of the men who was chanting and waving, rushes over to him and says, "Simeon, isn't that the man called Jesus? Why are you celebrating?" His friend looks at him a bit perplexed and says, "Honestly, I don't know anymore."

"Why are you celebrating?" Usually we don't have any trouble at all answering that question. "It's our son's thirteenth birthday!" "It's our fiftieth wedding anniversary!" "It's the Fourth of July!" "It's Christmas!" "It's our daughter's graduation!" "Our team made it to the Final Four!" We have plenty of reasons to celebrate and we love a good party—or parade!

Why are you celebrating today? Palm Sunday is one of those days in the Christian year that is difficult to pin down. Is it a celebration or is it the beginning of a period of mourning? We celebrate Jesus' so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but triumph over what? A few days later he will be hanging on a cross. Why are we celebrating?

The Marches for Change yesterday in Washington and all over our nation were impressive. Hundreds of thousands of young people, accompanied by their parents, teachers, and friends, paraded to make their shouts for change heard in Congress and throughout the country. They marched. They waved signs. They chanted and sang and made speeches. They were excited because they are being heard. They celebrated because they want change and they are going to make it happen. Why are we celebrating?

To be sure, the people who joined Jesus in Bethany and all along the route, did not miss the significance of what he was doing. He chose a young donkey for his short trip into the city, a route he had walked many times before. On this occasion, however, he was making a point. His followers, being good Jewish folk, knew their scriptures and they remembered what the prophet Zechariah had said long ago:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! 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 war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah 9:9-10

Zechariah talked about a shepherd-king who would re-establish the throne of David. However, Jesus the shepherd-king does not enter as a triumphant victor. As Zechariah prophesied, he would be struck and his sheep scattered as happened when Jesus was arrested and his disciples ran away.¹ The people wanted a warrior king who would chase off the Roman army and get back their promised land. Jesus was entering the city essentially to be defeated. What is there to celebrate about that? Why are we celebrating?

The events of this coming week are absurd at best and unbelievable to most. We tell a story about a man who antagonizes the religious authorities and business elite by turning over tables in the temple courtyard and using a homemade whip to run off religious profiteers. He cursed a fig tree for not

¹William Lane Craig, "The Triumphal Entry," *Reasonable Faith*; available online at: <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/jesus-of-nazareth/the-triumphal-entry/>; accessed 03/24/18.

producing fruit out of season as a metaphor for the barrenness of temple worship which no longer produced spiritual fruit.

This week we talk about a man who summons his followers to go borrowing again, this time an upper room. When his guests arrive to observe the Passover feast, this man who is supposed to be God Incarnate, Savior of the world, takes off his robe, wraps a towel around himself, and washes his disciples' feet, ordinarily the job of a house servant.

During the meal he tears a piece of bread and likens it to his body. He pours deep red wine and suggests it is his blood. He tells his closest friends, men who have traversed Galilee and the road to Jerusalem with him for three years, that one of them will betray him. Then he tells that one to get going and do what he must.

After the meal they sing a song and go to a lonely garden where they are supposed to pray. Jesus pours out his heart and begs God to spare him but offers to do whatever God wishes. His friends, exhausted by the pace of the week or too much wine cannot keep their eyes open, even to pray. Soon a mob arrives guided by none other than Judas Iscariot, disciple of Jesus, keeper of the common purse, Zealot who wants to force Jesus' hand to act in defiance of the Romans. Tensions are high, a sword is drawn, an ear is cut, and Jesus calls a halt to the impending violence. Putting his hand to the man's ear, he heals him, and putting us all on notice, he suggests that violence is not the path to peace but is a route to death.

A mock trial, a frightened governor, a frenzied crowd, and a death penalty conviction put Jesus on a cross where he dies an excruciating death. Three days later, we are told, the tomb where his body was placed is found empty, and Jesus is no longer dead but is very much alive.

Some would say you can't make up this stuff while others will insist that someone did. Many people will ignore these events altogether while quite a few will give little more than lip service to what this week represents. Prayer and vigils and the irony of the bad things that happened on a good day will give way to basketball and golf and an early spring opportunity for a trip to the beach. What will we do with this week that is supposed to be holy? How do we handle the stuff of Holy Week? What are you celebrating?

I suggest that we celebrate the fact that the one person who deserved the adoration and acclamation of every citizen of Jerusalem and Rome was content to ride, not a gallant warrior steed, but a humble donkey, and that he

did not need a bully pulpit to make his point but could illustrate the greatest truths of existence with his simple and loving life.

I suggest that we celebrate the passion of a man who saw religion turned into a commodity and cursed the robbers and profiteers who sought refuge behind the veil of faith.

I suggest that we celebrate the strong bonds of fellowship despite betrayal, the tenacious endurance of love in the face of despair, the hopeful resilience of grace under attack by the fiercest of evil, and the obstinate resistance of life to the darkest shadows of death.

I suggest that we celebrate the choice of suffering when all options have run their course, the blessedness of sacrifice for the abundance of another, the inevitability of death, and the eternal promise of life.

I suggest that we enter this Holy Week not with a tight grip on a faith we have been handed but with honest doubts and misgivings, with skepticism and uncertainty, and with a heart eager to discover the wonder of Jesus. I hope that we will begin this last sprint to the cross with the excitement of a child who knows that despite all indications to the contrary, there is yet one more egg to be found in the hunt. I hope that we will step into this Holy Week celebrating the fact that we profess a faith that is truly absurd to the world but firmly planted on the altar of our heart. I hope that we will live out this Holy Week believing that despite all of the doubts, our prayers do make a difference and the difference is found in how we live.²

Above all, I hope that we will enter this week with a celebratory mood because we are on the final steps of our journey to the cross and beyond to the garden of resurrection. I hope that we will celebrate because, in spite of the fact that resurrection is the craziest, most absurd, and implausible belief you could think of, we have experienced it. We know, and therefore we celebrate.

Why are we celebrating? We may not fully understand, but we know. Our heart calls us to the party, our feet guide us to the parade, and our lips sing hosannas because King Jesus is riding on!

²Karoline Lewis, "Why Holy Week," *Dear Working Preacher* (March 20, 2018); available online at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5117>. Dr. Lewis suggests that the uncertainty of Holy Week is one aspect of its importance and offers some of the suggestions mentioned as reasons for the significance of these holy days.

March 25, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Almighty and Merciful God, we join our hearts and voices with those of old as we wave our palms and shout our Hosannas in praise to you. We are grateful for your presence among us, for the example of mercy and sacrifice demonstrated by our Lord, and for the suffering he endured for our sake. We are grateful for our own call to live lives of discipleship and service so that we might reflect your goodness to those we encounter. We are grateful for the voices of children that inspire and challenge us to follow you with a childlike faith. And we are grateful for your grace which reaches out for us, even when we are far off, and never gives up on us, even when we have given up on ourselves. For these and every gift that we receive from your generous hand, O Lord, we offer our thanks and praise.

We are also aware, Gracious God, that like those of Christ's first disciples, our shouts of "Hosanna!" will all too soon become cries of "Crucify Him!" and our praises will turn into jeers and denials. Even as we prepare to celebrate the most significant and joyful observance of our faith, we must first pass through the betrayal of Maundy Thursday and the grief of Good Friday. May the darkness and difficulty of the coming days prepare us for ministry in the dark and difficult places of our world. Grant that we might offer healing to the sick and hurting, companionship to the lonely and forgotten, compassion to the needy, peace to those who suffer violence, and hope to those who see no way out. Give us courage as we walk through this sacred week that we might be ready to receive the fullness of your Resurrection grace. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who in living showed us a glimpse of your kingdom, and in dying and rising to new life offers to us your wondrous love. Amen.

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