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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, March 28, 2021
Palm Sunday in Lent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Processional Gospel: Mark 11:1-11
First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9a
Second Reading: Philippians 2:5-11
Gospel Reading: Mark 14:1—15:47
Sermon Title: “Let the Celebration Begin!”

Theme

This week, the center of the church’s year is one of striking contrasts: Jesus rides into Jerusalem surrounded by shouts of glory, only to be left alone to die on the cross, abandoned by even his closest friends. Mark’s gospel presents Jesus in his complete human vulnerability: agitated, grieved, scared, forsaken. Though we lament Christ’s suffering and all human suffering, we also expect God’s salvation: in the wine and bread, Jesus promises that his death will mark a new covenant with all people. We enter this holy week thirsty for the completion of God’s astonishing work.

Text

¹When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [Jesus] sent two of his disciples ²and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” ⁴They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. ⁷Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Sermon

Today this church celebrates *Palm Sunday*. We are probably one of only a few churches, especially Lutheran churches, that actually celebrate *Palm Sunday*. Yes, I know that sounds surprising, but what most Lutheran churches celebrate today is *Passion Sunday*, and it typically concludes with the reading of the Passion of our Lord.

Typically, we start this day with the procession of palms, but not this year. Fact is, we didn't last year either. Last year it was just Eric Vargo and me in the sanctuary shooting a video of the Palm Sunday service. Traditionally, it would be at this point of the service when you would sit and listen to the long reading of the Passion, and by the end of the worship service, you would have gone on an emotional roller coaster ride from celebration and hopefulness to despair and hopelessness.

However, the Worship Table has decided to truly celebrate Palm Sunday and avoid the Passion of Our Lord *for today*. I invite you into Our Lord Jesus' journey to the cross, through the grave, and to the celebration of the Resurrection through the rest of the worship services for the week and through the Daily Word. So, "Let the Celebration Begin!"

You are probably aware of the context, but Mark didn't do a very good job setting the stage. Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. For Jews, Passover is the holiest day and festival commemorating God sparing the Israelites when God killed the firstborn of Egypt and is followed by the seven-day Feast of the Unleavened Bread commemorating the Exodus from Egypt and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery. In 2021, Passover began *last night* at sundown, Saturday, March 27.

The holy city of Jerusalem was crowded for the festival of the Passover every year, but that year, that infamous year, there was a buzz, an excitement, that simply could not be denied. It was rumored that Jesus of Nazareth, the acclaimed preacher, and teacher, and performer of signs and miracles, was in the area and was expected to make an appearance in Jerusalem.

In Matthew's Gospel, the crowd included those who were first-hand eyewitnesses of the resuscitation of Lazarus. Imagine, Lazarus had been dead and buried for three

days, and Jesus raised him in what I imagine was like a scene from a mummy movie!

And those eyewitnesses told people and they too were excited to get a glimpse of this man that so many had talked about with great enthusiasm.

This particular story was covered by all four gospels and there are many similarities but there are also some interesting differences. John was more efficient when it comes to Jesus' ride. He wrote that Jesus simply found a young donkey and got on it.

Mark simply called it a colt that Jesus rode. Whether Jesus knew it or not, whether the people knew it or not, the prophet Zechariah wrote in 539 BC that Israel's king would be welcomed into Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

Another difference in the stories is that John alone mentions that the people use palm branches to welcome Jesus. Interesting, don't you think, that while the other three gospels refer to *branches of trees* and *leafy branches*, the church names this day after one minor element of the story that only John refers to?

Turns out that branches of palm had a specific meaning to the Jews. In about 167 BCE the Maccabees revolted against the Seleucids who occupied Israel at that time (before the Romans) and managed to win independence for a few years. Whenever their independence was celebrated, palm branches were a symbol of triumph and victory. So you see, palm branches were not used just because palm branches were something readily available, but because they represented the hope of the Jews – victory and independence! And at that moment, it was ascribed to Jesus! "Let the Celebration Begin!"

Add to the colt of a donkey fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy and the people's use of palm branches, the words they used to welcome Jesus:

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
¹⁰Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Hosanna is a Hebraic liturgical word that means “save us, we pray”, or “save us please.” Hosanna is a prayer that can only be said to the Lord.

So, in this story, we have Jesus entering the holy city of Jerusalem. Thousands who have been talking about him went out to greet him. They greeted him riding on a little donkey with the waving of branches of palms and shouts of Hosanna and calling him the King of Israel! Hmm, what is going on here?

How many times has Jesus asked people not to divulge his true messianic identity?

Why was he now so willing to let them celebrate him so when he never was before?

(Pause)

Have you ever heard the following names? Fantasia Barrino, Kris Allen, Lee DeWyze?

If I add to that list, Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood, do you have a guess what they all have in common?

All of them are former winners of American Idol. Isn't it interesting that some are household names and other we don't remember.

Idol is a powerful name, isn't it? In just the case of American Idol, I think it is clear that you might be the winner this year but forgotten about next year if you don't give the American public what we want.

Jesus came riding into town fulfilling scripture and accepting the adulation of the people. The words of the frustrated Pharisees capture it all when, in John's Gospel, they say to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

(Pause)

I think what was going on here was that Jesus was letting them make an idol out of him to expose the fickleness of the people and to set the stage for his own big reveal of the kind of messiah he truly is. By the end of this same week, the people will be calling for his death at the top of their lungs. They want a messiah *of their liking* – they want him to do for them what *they* want!!!

But Jesus will be obedient to just one – his Heavenly Father. Despite the angry mob of the very people God chose to be God's people, God is about to demonstrate God's love, grace, and mercy in the most unusual way.

This week, if you follow along with the Daily Word, it will be difficult to understand how this Jesus, who was so willing to accept the people's praise on Sunday, is the same person the rest of the week.

“Those ignorant Jews!” we say. Aren't you glad we aren't like they are? Looking to one military and political leader after another to fix all our problems?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

While Jesus' messiah-ship and ruler-ship are intended for *everyone* and can be embraced by *anyone*, it is not. It takes courage and conviction to articulate what kind of king and messiah Jesus *is* for the world. Nevertheless, that is the disciple's task, to have faith in him and speak of it to others. Will you help spread the good news to the world we live in?

Prayer

O God of mercy and might, in the mystery of the passion of your Son you offer your infinite life to the world. Gather us around the cross of Christ, and preserve us until the resurrection, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen