

Palm Sunday A 2023 Matthew 21:1-11

I don't know why, but last week I was thinking about our Journey to Bethlehem program, which got me to thinking that every church I've ever been part of has done some kind of Christmas pageant with costumes, props, and actors memorizing lines, but none have done the same for Easter—even though Easter is the chief celebration of the Church. I wonder if it's because the characters in the Christmas story are mostly good guys, while the Passion story has a lot more bad guys—or at least characters who are both good and bad. We stick to telling this week's story collectively, maybe so we don't have to see ourselves quite so clearly as the antagonists: Today we can be the crowd shouting Hosanna and waving palm branches...and not think about how the same crowd shouts for Jesus' crucifixion at the end of the week. On Maundy Thursday we can be the disciples getting our feet washed and sharing the last supper...and not think about how the same disciples betrayed, denied, and abandoned Jesus within hours. On Friday we can see ourselves as Mary the mother of Jesus, and John the beloved disciple, keeping vigil at the foot of the cross...and not think of ourselves as Judas, Caiaphas, Herod, Pontius Pilate, or the soldiers casting lots over Jesus' robe. Still, it has always seemed strange to me that we act out the celebration of Palm Sunday as if we forget what the next part of the story entails; or maybe we just want to forget?

Matthew reminds us that Jesus' triumphal entry fulfills prophecy, specifically the words of the prophet Zechariah. But beyond checking the prophecy box, this procession contrasts Jesus with worldly rulers as it foreshadows the tragic days ahead. When Matthew's community would have first heard about Jesus entering Jerusalem, "humble and seated on a donkey" as Zechariah foretold, with the crowds preparing the way by laying down their cloaks and tree branches, they would have noted the ways that this procession differed from the Roman parades they were used to seeing. Imagine that while Jesus is headed into the east side of the city in this impromptu humble procession, on the west side, in preparation for keeping order during the festival of Passover, Pilate rides into town on a war horse, on a Roman road paved by conscripted labor, not welcomed by the colonized Judeans but flanked by paid Roman soldiers, inspiring fear, not joy. Jesus, the ruler of the kingdom of God, isn't like the kings and rulers of this

world. He doesn't employ military might or violence; he doesn't enforce his way through fear or coercion; he acts with humility instead of pomp and circumstance. Everything human institutions seem to value in a ruler, Jesus takes the opposite approach.

We are meant to contrast the joyous shouts of the crowd lining the road from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem with what happens later. After the last supper, Jesus will return to the Mount of Olives to pray in the garden of Gethsemane—but the scene will be much different. No longer surrounded by shouts of praise, but alone and in silence while his disciples sleep, Jesus will look across this same valley to see Judas leading the same crowd, but this time armed with swords and clubs, coming to arrest him. When Jesus fails to act like the mighty and powerful king the people thought they were welcoming, they are easily swayed to abandon their loyalties and switch from praise to persecution.

We read about Jesus' triumphal entry today *only* in light of what is to follow—the supper where Jesus will wash feet and command love, the arrest where Jesus will tell his disciples to put away their swords, the trial and crucifixion where Jesus will forgo asking for angelic intervention, where he will forgive his enemies instead of seeking vengeance against them. In Jesus' passion, God not only defeated sin, death, and evil, God triumphed *without* conforming to the methods of this world. We want a hero on the war horse, but Jesus rides a donkey. We want the King of kings, but without the crown of thorns. We want today's palm parade, but without the cross as its destination. We want next Sunday's glorious resurrection, but without facing Jesus' death, because following the one who was willing to give up even life itself might require us to give up what we don't want to let go.

I invite you to be part of the whole story this week—whether you listen to it here in worship on Thursday and Friday or read it on your own at home—but not for the purpose of feeling bad when we get to the sad, unjust, and painful parts of the Passion. Read it through again to remember who Jesus really is: the God of humility, service, and compassion; the God of peace, mercy, and forgiveness; the God who could have ushered in the kingdom by force, coercion, or self-serving power, but who chose the way of selfless love instead. Let us remember once again that Jesus let nothing come between him and his love for us; then let us learn how he's calling us to go and do likewise.