

Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 11: 1-11)

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, [Jesus] sent two of his disciples and 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. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

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

Blessed is the coming kingdom of
our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then 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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Palm Sunday. I have a confession to make. Every year we try to get Palm Sunday right. The staff plots for a week about who will come in first, and how will we make sure everybody finds a seat, and where the palms will be. It is a day that is a little chaotic and a little uncomfortable. And nobody quite knows what's happening out there in the Gathering Space. And, frankly, I've come to believe that you can't get it right. What we do is a great reenactment of the first Palm Sunday. Exciting, a little weird, and kind of confusing. But remember that first Palm Sunday was the week of Passover.

Think Fourth of July week. Everybody is on vacation, and you're having the family cookout. So there is so much to do, so much to prepare. How many people are coming? You've got to go buy some burgers. You know the "it's going to be fun but I've got a lot to do" feeling. Then you find yourself caught up in an impromptu parade. It's a Fourth of July parade! Kids on trikes, waving flags, throwing some candy. Everybody is laughing and clapping, and having some fun. It's exciting and chaotic, and a little weird, and nobody knows what's happening.

But Jesus is a little more intentional for his part of the parade. This is not impromptu for him. He's got a plan, a well-considered plan. Jesus is about to give a sermon without words to this rowdy crowd. It is preaching at its very best. It's memorable and engaging and meaningful, and doesn't use a single word. So let's take a look at the sermon that Jesus preaches on the first Palm Sunday.

“When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives”

“Near the Mount of Olives.” Jesus has just walked twelve miles from Jericho, and he stopped in Bethany, near the Mount of Olives. So there are a couple of things you should know about the Mount of Olives. There is a weight of history on that place; a weight of grief and of longing and of hope. If there is any place that God will come to save God's people, that is it.

King David escapes to the Mount of Olives when his son Absalom raised an army and took over Jerusalem. We read in Second Samuel:

“David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, with his head covered and walking barefoot; and all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went.”

There is such grief there over lost dreams and lost family and lost future. Weeping and grieving and hopelessness and need on that Mount of Olives

Later, the prophet Ezekiel sees the Glory of God leave the temple just before it is destroyed by the Babylonians, and the Glory of God rests on the Mount of Olives. This is where God is. This is where God will be when Jerusalem and the temple are gone.

And then Zechariah has a vision of God descending and standing on the mountain in the last days. That was the First Reading today.

“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem to the east; And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one.”

There is some serious history at this location. It is the place where grief, and failure, and longing meet hope, and glory, and redemption. This is the place God comes. Where God comes to save and redeem and make new. Jesus knows what he's doing when he starts the parade at the Mount of Olives.

Today, our parade starts out there in the Gathering Space. Which begs the question: Where do we look for God to come? In the sanctuary? In the sky? In each other's faces? Where do we look for God to come?

And even more than that, what is the weight of our grief and longing and our hope for this God who is coming? What do we hope for that God will do, as God comes to us?

Okay. I want you to do something. I want you to do something. I want you to grab your palm. Everybody should have a palm; if you don't, the ushers can give you a hand to get a palm. You don't have to hold it up. Somewhere in the pew, or if you have one on your person, grab a pen. Grab a pen. We put a couple extras in the pews. People generally have one with them. You may have to share. But I discovered this week that you can write on palms. You can write on palms. So I would like you to write on your palm a word, or a picture, or a symbol that will describe what you long for. It will describe your grief, or longing, or hope. It could be, "I pray that the pain will go away." It could be, "I pray that my child will find their way." "I pray for world peace." Whatever it is that you hope for, that you long for, write it on your palm.

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Now, remember that I said Jesus was very intentional about this sermon that he was preaching without words. We read that he starts at the Mount of Olives, the place of longing and hope. And then we read:

"[Jesus] sent two of his disciples and 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'."

Jesus is making a point not just by where the parade is, but by what is in this parade. Jesus had already walked twelve miles, like I said. He has one mile left to get to Jerusalem. You don't walk twelve miles and then call the Uber. Jesus stops for a donkey for a good reason. He is doing it to make a point.

And, surprise, the point is not that he is riding a donkey. Everybody rode donkeys. Look it up in the Bible. Kings rode donkeys, prophets rode donkeys; every-day men and women rode donkeys. Donkey was the basic form of transportation. It was the Ford Taurus of the day. "Saddle my donkey" repeats over and over throughout the Old Testament. "Saddle my donkey, I need to go there." "Saddle my donkey, I need to talk to that person."

Nobody ever says, "Saddle my horse," because nobody rode a horse. Horses were only ridden by soldiers, and they were only ridden for war. In the Bible, the word "horse" is always accompanied by words like "chariot," or "rider with sword." It was the equivalent today of a tank. If Jesus is not coming by foot, his choice is a Ford Taurus or a tank. Jesus chooses the Taurus – the way of love and peace; not the way of war and conquest. Jesus chooses the donkey, the Ford Taurus. But not any Ford Taurus. He is very particular.

Remember, I said that he is preaching a sermon here. He says, "*You will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden.*" This is a brand new Ford Taurus. It still smells of new leather. No scratches, no dents.

But, more to the point, it is not a car that has been provided by somebody else. It has not been provided by the temple leaders, or by his friend Lazarus, or by the lobbyists for a corporation. He is not like King Solomon, who rode in his coronation his father's donkey, to say, "I am in this line of kings." This colt has no strings attached. It is new; never ridden.

Jesus comes in newness and freedom to act however God wishes. No one has power to make commands over Jesus, or stifle the creativity of this Messiah. This Messiah will do the unexpected, the unbounded, the unimagined things needed to bring about a new creation. So, if Jesus is the one on the un-ridden donkey, if Jesus is in the freedom and creativity to act in this world in unimagined ways, I'm going to ask you to do one more thing. I am going to ask you to write again on your palm a prayer, a prayer asking God to act in your life. God is creative; God is powerful. Write a prayer, asking God to act. Maybe to act on that deep longing you wrote earlier; maybe to act in another way.

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After the service today, I will invite you to take your palm home with you. So, I know you usually recycle them, but take it home with you so you can continue to pray this prayer all week.

Jesus comes in the mystery and the glory and the power of God to transform us and this world. God comes into our deepest griefs and longings, and hopes. Jesus comes in love for us, and peace, and the freedom to disregard old ways and demands and expectations. He comes in new and creative ways to bring about newness and life. And, you know, that's not a bad sermon to speak without words. And the people respond with "*Hosanna!*," which is Aramaic. In English, it means, "Save us." "Save us now." Jesus proclaims this as he goes to the Holy City for the costly work of salvation. Jesus preaches what he is going to do, and then he goes and does it.

As we begin our journey with Christ into the city, to the cross and beyond, I invite you to join in the proclamation of that day. So the last thing I am going to ask you to do is this: Stand up and grab your palm. I am going to end with a prayer, and as I say "*Hosanna!*" I invite you to respond, "Save us now." Okay. Let's try it out.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Okay. Get those palms going.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Save us, O God, from the fear that swirls around us and binds us.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Save us, O God, from the devastation of this good earth.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Save us, O God. Our children are not safe in their schools or homes.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Save us, O God, from the inability to speak with love and to listen with resilience.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Save us, O God, from the grief of burying one more friend who has died from cancer or other disease.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Save us, O God, from all those things that separate us from you.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Come to us, God, in perfect love and perfect freedom to save us, and answer all our prayers of deep, deep longing.

Hosanna!

Save us now!

Amen.