

## *Of Parades and Pandemics*

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We will be reading Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, what we know as Palm Sunday. It is the start of Holy Week when we walk with Jesus into suffering and then celebrate his glory on Easter. In this unique time in our lives, I pray that the Spirit will add new meaning to these ancient words, that they might be living water for us all.

**Matthew 21:1-11** When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, (BETH-fa-gee) at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.\*' <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> 'Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

<sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God. AMEN**

Palm Sundays are pretty special at Oak Grove. The choir sings gorgeous music, and they rehearse for extra singing during Holy Week services and Easter. Palm Sunday typically begins a super busy week for our musicians, including the intergenerational orchestra. This Sunday, too, our Deacons

offer a brunch, serving over 200 people between services. Children and youth eat with families and then enjoy faith formation with their teachers.

Today we had no parade into the sanctuary, organ blasting, palms waving. You know how it goes...the choir, pastors and children waving with gusto, youth awkwardly lifting the palm a bit or mussing a sibling's hair with it, and others just smiling and watching. A happy, joy-filled morning.

Because we cannot gather in person on what is arguably the most significant time of the church year, I want to acknowledge the grief that accompanies cancellations and isolation and name the fear and uncertainty of these days.

Yet, we know that God meets us where we are. In this particular worship diaspora, we are together in spirit, via the wonder of our hearts, the goodness of God, and the magic of the internet. As the song says, the church is not a place, it's a people.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day so long ago, it was crowded, as multitudes were in the city to celebrate the Passover, the festival that commemorates Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt, and celebrates God's power to save.

Jesus enters the city from the Mount of Olives, the traditional location where the Messiah was said to appear. He rides a colt, fulfilling the prophetic vision in the book of Zechariah.

This year, when the world as we know it has been turned on its head by the Coronavirus, the Palm Sunday story feels particularly poignant, as we lament the world's suffering and lay claim to our hope. I simply want to share a few observations about the passage as it relates to our situation now.

First, Jesus' followers in Jerusalem shout "Hosanna!" as he passes by.

Hosanna means help us, save us. It is a petition asking for healing from a particular threat. Those in Jesus' time were living under the oppression of the Roman Empire, where they endured grave economic, emotional and physical suffering.

Hosanna is a plea that comes from the gut, yet filled with hope. The people wanted something different from the cruelty, power and violence that came from Herod.

With all the color and pageantry we reenact on this day, it is easy to forget that the word Hosanna is different than Halleluiah. We will save our Hallelujahs, our praise the Lord! for next week on Easter.

Hosanna is our prayer now. Help us, O God. Save us from this pandemic. Heal our world and its people. Strengthen those who care for the sick.

Hosanna, blessed be Jesus, who comes as the great physician. Hosanna, blessed be Jesus, who comes with compassion and kindness.

Hosanna, blessed be Jesus, who comes to care for the poor and disenfranchised, the ones who will be most affected by the virus.

Second, we call this Palm Sunday, but palms are only mentioned specifically in the gospel of John. Careful listeners noted that Matthew never mentions palms. The people welcoming Jesus took off their cloaks or grabbed a branch from the tree next to them to create a kind of royal red carpet for Jesus. They worshipped with what was close at hand.

In our homes today, we too can raise our voices and use what is near to welcome the Holy One.

What is close by that you can lift in prayer and hope? Is it an electric candle? A stuffed animal? A part of a houseplant? Or maybe you were able to stop by the church and get a palm. When we work with what we have, we join countless others who historically, have had to discover innovative ways to worship and create sacred space when they couldn't be together.

Church buildings and stained glass windows are helpful and beautiful. And they are also a luxury. I've never taken our sanctuary for granted, ever, but I've also never appreciated this space more than I do now. But the long, long witness of God's people reminds me that we can worship in spirit and truth with the ordinary things have around us.

And, finally, let's consider palms. It is, after all, Palm Sunday. I'm not talking about the palms that grow in and around Jerusalem, or the eco palms we wave when we are together, but the palms at the end of our arms.

I've always loved the idea of children cutting their handprint out of green paper and using them to make palms for this celebration.

Palms have taken on new meaning in the pandemic – they are a valuable resource. Bathing our palms, our fingers our wrists for 20 seconds with soap and warm water is more than getting clean, it is an act of love and justice. It helps stop the spread of the disease, keeps us safe and stops the spread of disease.

Palms are extraordinary!

Palms can clasp in prayer for the sick, the suffering, the dying.

Palms can lift in praise and thanksgiving for palms of mercy that tenderly care for the sick at great personal risk and sacrifice.

Thanksgiving for palms that plant seeds, stock grocery shelves, that deliver mail, and clean buildings.

Palms can wave in greeting to a passer-by.

Palms can hold a phone and reach out.

Clothed in the sacred garb of gloves, palms can prepare sandwiches for people living on the streets.

Palms can press at windows and doors, assuring a loved one that they are not alone.

And, in an act of Sabbath faithfulness, we can lay our palms down and simply rest, and breathe, and be still.

Today, more than any other Palm Sunday in memory, people of faith are united in ways we could only imagine a few months ago. United in Hosanna, united in hope for the world that God loves so much, united in efforts to use our palms to express love. In small and large acts, ordinary humans are showing up (or staying home) with extraordinary courage to bring peace and compassion.

As we head into holy week, I pray that we will trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us, and give us confidence to know that Easter cannot be stopped. It will come in the midst of pain, chaos and will confound our expectations, just as it always has.

Thanks be to God.