

Hope Amid the Hosannas
Luke 19:28-44
March 28, 2021
Palm Sunday

I tried to rent a donkey for Palm Sunday, but they were all booked! We'll have to get our order in early for next year! There is an exciting, "parade like" quality to Palm Sunday. Maybe there will be some of that same excitement when we are finally out of lock down. This is, after all, one of the high holy days of the church year.

Today we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was a day filled with great expectations. We remember the waving palms and enormous, cheering crowds. We greet Jesus with excitement.

Palm Sunday is a time for waving palms, bell ringing and Hosannas. Palm Sunday is the best known parade in the Bible—and everybody loves a parade. But beyond all that, there's a serious side to this Sunday. Every Palm Sunday is also a day of decision. It has been so since the beginning.

Two thousand years ago, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he was calling that city to decide. Everything Jesus did on that day was carefully planned. He timed it all for maximum impact and effect.

Jesus arrived when Jerusalem was crowded with hundreds of thousands of travelers. It was Passover week, the holiest week of the year. Religious enthusiasm was running high. He arranged in advance to borrow a colt that had never been ridden. This was a powerful piece of symbolism for Jews at that time. There was a well-known prophesy that the King would come to Jerusalem on the back of an donkey that had never been ridden. (Zechariah 9.9).

Jesus approached Jerusalem from the east, coming down from the Mount of Olives. A popular legend said that's the direction the Messiah would come from. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was carefully thought out and planned. He wanted to call the city to God, and not Caesar.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked. Jesus got a variety of answers from a variety of people on that first Palm Sunday. Different people said different things. His disciples were there. They knew Jesus well. They had heard him preach and teach. They had seen him work miracles. They saw Jesus give sight to the blind, heal the lame and feed five thousand with five loaves and two fish.

But in spite of everything they'd seen, the disciples sometimes had doubts and questions. Even they did not fully understand. They were afraid when Jesus turned toward Jerusalem. "It's crazy," they told him. "You've got to turn back. You'll get all of us killed!"

Yet destiny was at work this day. As they stood overlooking the city from the high point upon the Mount, it was hot-blooded, impulsive Peter who first took off his coat and laid it on the road in front of the donkey. Then he started cutting palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna!"

Waving palm branches was an ancient way of welcoming a King. On that Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, the disciples decided. The disciples chose to follow Jesus as their Messiah and King.

But there were others in the crowd in the heat and dust that afternoon. The zealots were there. They were violent revolutionaries. They shouted "Hosanna!" They waved palm branches, too. But they were interested in Jesus for different reasons. They saw Jesus as a misguided idealist, maybe even a religious fanatic. They recognized and admired his ability to stir up a crowd.

The Scribes and Pharisees were in the crowd, too. As the others cheered, they cursed silently under their breath. They hated Jesus—they hated the fact that the whole world seemed to be following him. They didn't care for his religious views, or the people he hung out with, and they made plans to get rid of him as soon as they could.

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Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a call to a decision. Some found hope in Jesus. They followed him as disciples. Others were only interested in Jesus if they could use him for their own gain. Others rejected him because he challenged their theology and politics. Where would you have been in the crowd? Where would you be today?

Today, you and I have the benefit of hindsight upon which to make our decision. We know who Jesus claimed to be, and we are called to comprehend his claim on our lives today. He is still looking for those willing to live out the Good News of the gospel – to care for the hungry, the homeless, and victims of violence, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Will we follow his example? Will others see the reflection of Christ in our lives and in our actions? The Christ people see reflected in you may be the only Christ they ever know.

This Palm Sunday, can we experience the passion of Christ in new and unexpected ways? Ways that move us closer to God? Palm Sunday is a time of mixed emotions. We cheer along with the crowd and wave palms, shouting, “Hosanna.”

We cheer with a heavy heart and a foreboding because we know what the end of the week brings. It brings suffering, sadness and death to the only perfectly good man who ever lived. In that regard, we know more than those first disciples knew.

Jesus knew that soon he would die. He knew Judas would betray him. He knew Peter would deny him three times, that the disciples would abandon him, and the crowd would call for his death. He knew and yet he carried on, though his heart was breaking. He even ate and drank with Judas; he continued to pray with Peter, though Peter would let him down. He knew, and yet he continued on to his hour of suffering and death.

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Today Jesus beckons us to what I would call the heroic mode of living, and it is exemplified in the parade that is Palm Sunday. The heroic mode of living refers to the willingness to live with courage in the face of suffering and death. It invites us to live with compassion and care towards others as well as the environment.

The heroic mode of living invites us to do the little things well that give life meaning, such as cooking a meal for a friend, or taking a neighbor to the doctor. We choose to give life meaning and purpose. It means treating others as you would want to be treated. The heroic mode of living evokes an existential, “Yes!” as we ascribe meaning to our actions. This all presupposes that there is a Grand Design behind all things, as I do.

The heroic mode of living for me means being intentional about shaping a spiritual life, and formulating a theology that has integrity. What will you do with this day? A common, ordinary day? The only day you have? Will you take time to reflect on your relationship with the divine? Will we be as intentional about our life as Christ was with his?

Will you make it a point to find Christ in everything you do – when you wash the dishes? When you take a walk in the beautiful outdoors? Can you see God’s love reflected in a baby, or the devotion of a husband and wife who have been married for fifty years?

The heroic mode of living calls us to lift up our doctors and nurses who have

put themselves on the front line in caring for covid patients in the face of suffering and death. They are the real heroes. They exemplify Christ-like virtues in their service and compassion for others.

Palm Sunday challenges us to work for peace and justice, and to feel outrage in the face of senseless violence. There is hope in those who march in a Black Lives Matter protest that things can change, that people can change and overcome hate and prejudice. Palm Sunday is the opportunity to be fully alive to the moment and the meaning at hand.

Finally, Palm Sunday invites us to find hope in the face of challenges and setbacks. I have thought a lot lately about the covid long haulers – those people who continue to face extreme symptoms both physical and mental in the months and even a year now after initially contacting the illness. As one long hauler put it lately in an article I read, “I have to have hope that things will get better – that I can get back to some semblance of a normal life. If I don’t have hope, I would have nothing at all.”

Above all, Palm Sunday brings us hope. That’s what Jesus brought. Hope amid the Hosannahs, even when everything around us might seem hopeless. It is hope that survives holy week and even death on a cross. With Palm Sunday, there is hope for you and me. Amen.

Luke 19:28-44 Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

²⁸ After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹ When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying,

"Blessed is the king
 who comes in the name of the Lord!
 Peace in heaven,
 and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Jesus Weeps over Jerusalem

⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."