

Walking Into Holy Week

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April 4-5, 2020 Palm Sunday—Pandemic Closure Week 4

This weekend we join with Christians the world over in an observance called Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is the first event in a week the Christian tradition has come to call Holy Week because of the momentous events that occurred during it in the earthly life of Jesus, including the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and Christ's Crucifixion on Good Friday.

Today, Palm Sunday, commemorates an event described in all four gospels: Jesus entering Jerusalem for the last time. After three years of a public ministry filled with teaching and healing and serving, Jesus had resolved to "face the music," so to speak. He came to Jerusalem anticipating a confrontation with the religious authorities. They had constantly opposed him because he didn't follow rules and customs strictly – by the book – like they did.

How was Jesus different? Jesus believed that people should treat one another with grace and mercy, because that's the way God relates to us. "Do to others as you would have others do to you." Living by grace and mercy is what he tried to teach his twelve apostles. Grace and mercy is what he taught the crowds who flocked to hear him as he traveled from village to town. Grace and mercy is what he taught groups of other disciples who followed him from time to time.

It was such a circle of followers who greeted him as he entered Jerusalem on this particular day. Listen to Matthew's description, from Chapter 21 from a translation called the Common English Bible:

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. ²He said to them, "Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, say that their master needs them." He sent them off right away. ⁴Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, ⁵*Say to Daughter Zion, "Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring."* ⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

⁸Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. "Who is this?" they asked. ¹¹The crowds answered, "It's the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

For most people this is a very familiar story. We may remember this annual observance from our childhood because we got to hold a palm branch – perhaps one cut out of construction paper! – and we'd wave it excitedly as we'd parade down a church aisle, imagining we were following the donkey carrying Jesus or maybe even leading the way.

The donkey was an unusual choice for a ride for someone as noteworthy as Jesus. In those days a great figure like a king or general would have ridden a horse, but the lowly donkey was a draft animal used by the common folk. Approaching Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus was signaling his bond with the average person rather than with the powerful and influential leaders of temple, market and halls of government.

Matthew's account described the people covering mamma donkey and its baby with their cloaks to serve as an improvised saddle blanket. Others threw their cloaks on the pathway

or they cut branches off of nearby trees and laid them on the ground — all of that a sort of do-it-yourself “red carpet treatment” for their revered teacher. The name Palm Sunday came from that carpet of leafy branches.

What did the crowd cheer? That’s right: “Hosanna!” The Hebrew word translates literally as a plea: “Lord, save!” But by this time in that culture the word had evolved to be a general cheer of enthusiasm. We today do something comparable: when you’re at the ballpark and you hear the familiar cavalry trumpet fanfare “Ta-da-da-DAH-du-DAAA!” we naturally respond with “*Charge!*” Of course, we don’t *really* want our team’s players to charge their opponents; it’s just a shout of enthusiastic support. Similarly, in Jesus’ day cheers of “Hosanna!” expressed enthusiasm. Still, in the back of their minds the people remembered its literal meaning, too: they did indeed want their Lord to save them from their own sinful tendencies, to save them from the judgmental treatment of others.

Jesus started his Palm Sunday ride in the village of Bethany on the far side of the Mount of Olives — that’s where Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus lived (that Lazarus is the man Jesus raised to life after being dead four days). The parade — the demonstration — made its way along the steep, twisting paths down the Mount of Olives into the Kidron Valley, then up the equally steep trails leading to Mount Moriah, through the gates of the walled city, ending on the grounds of the Jerusalem Temple.

The gospels all say that this happened on a Sunday. In Jewish society, of course, the Sabbath happens on Friday night and Saturday, which makes Sunday a weekday, a workday like our Monday through Friday. The residents of Jerusalem going about their usual business could look across the valley and see this procession inching toward them. The approach of a crowd wasn’t so unusual; this center of religious and political authority was used to receiving pilgrims.

Nor was the group heading their way likely a very big crowd, certainly nothing like one of our Memorial Day or St. Patrick’s Day parades. The residents of Jerusalem might have peered into the distance and determined, based on the clothing, that the small crowd coming their way was a bunch of out-of-towners from the countryside. But they probably were curious why the crowd was raising such a ruckus about a man on a donkey. Could this be that teacher “Jesus” whose reputation preceded him? Matthew tells us that the city “was thrown into an uproar” and the people shouted to the approaching visitors, “Who is he?”

They replied excitedly, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Palm Sunday poses a question for each of us: Have you ever wondered where you might have appeared in that story? Where would you have been in that picture?

- In the excited, cheering crowd escorting your beloved teacher and spiritual comforter into the big city?
- Or might you have been at a distance, peering over the city walls at the curious collection of rustic women and men and their master, suspicious of their motives, wondering what he would want from you?

As Jesus presented himself to the people of Jerusalem on that day, Jesus offers himself to us today. Jesus longs to know you, to be with you in your daily walk, to encourage you, comfort you, strengthen you, bless you with God’s unstoppable love. But do you welcome him?

Every step Jesus took, he took in obedience to God his Heavenly Parent. He calls us to live by faith, to trust in God, to welcome God’s grace that blesses us with forgiveness for our past and hope for our future.

Jesus invites us to walk with him in obedience, in trust, in faith, but for us to walk one step less. As we will consider in the days of this Holy Week, with love divine, all loves excelling, Jesus will take upon himself the penalty we deserve by stepping to the Cross.