

Sermon, March 28, 2021

Palm Sunday

Good morning. Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome back Debi and Sean Beachy, for Special Music. We hope to be opening up on a limited basis for in-person worship soon. We'll first need a few volunteers to help with the extra cleaning that will be required, and we will need a couple of ushers to help us operate safely. If you are willing to help, please call the church office. In a recent congregational survey several folks expressed interest in joining our on-line Adult Forum. Problem is the survey was anonymous, so we don't know who you are. Again, please call the church office and we will get you enrolled and invited. Now for today's stupid joke:

My pastor friend says she's in trouble with her bishop. I asked, "What happened?" And she said, "He came to preach at my church last week and only seven people showed up." I said, "Well it's the middle of a pandemic. That's hardly your fault." She said, "But then the Bishop asked 'did you announce to your people that I was coming today? And without thinking she said, of course not, but apparently they found out anyway." Oops.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, you sent your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take our flesh upon you and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Philippians, the second chapter. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the eleventh chapter.

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.

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it.

When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. Then they came to Jerusalem.

And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.

He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

In most Catholic and Mainline Protestant churches today, they opened the service with a celebratory palm procession like we usually do. And then they read the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem like we did. But now instead of a sermon, they are reading the story of the arrest, torture, death and burial of Jesus.

They are doing that because back in 1970 Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday were officially combined into Palm-Passion Sunday as part of the Catholic Church reforms of Vatican II. Many Protestants followed suit. Prior to that, Passion Sunday was actually observed the week before Palm Sunday, which of course made no sense at all. How could you commemorate Jesus' death in Jerusalem a week before he even got there?

But then again combining this celebratory beginning with the agonizing ending without somehow tying the two together renders the combined Palm-Passion experience at best contradictory and at worst, oddly unsettling. So here at St. Mark's we have broken with recent Church tradition. Today is Palm Sunday. Period.

Palm Sunday is one of those rare stories that shows up in all four gospels, and each account is a little different from the others. John is the only one that even mentions palms. In Luke people throw down cloaks in front of Jesus, and there are no leaves or branches of any kind. According to Matthew and Mark, the cursing of the fig tree was closely related to the cleansing of the Temple. And it is an essential part of their Palm Sunday stories, which is why I added the verses to today's reading that I did.

In their view, Jesus came into Jerusalem this week specifically to expose corruption among religious leaders and rid the Temple of dishonesty, and he apparently made a scene. In fact, Matthew, Mark AND Luke imply that disturbance is ultimately what led to Jesus' arrest, torture and execution.

Which would make sense, because hundreds of thousands of Jews typically crowded into the city during Passover week, including the Zealots, a Palestinian separatist group bent on stirring up political unrest and starting a revolution, or what today might be called a lawless insurrection at the capitol. (The more things change...)

Pontius Pilate was known to bring extra Homeland Security forces into the city especially for the religious holidays.

As Jesus rode in today, probably through the East Gate of Jerusalem; across town thousands of heavily armed Roman soldiers were likely doing the same. Causing a disturbance of any kind, anywhere, especially at the temple, certainly could have gotten anyone arrested and summarily executed.

So what about the fig tree? As we have discussed many times in the Adult Forum, the Gospel of Mark has the most human presentation of Jesus. In Mark Jesus gets tired at times. He gets hungry; he gets angry; and despite the way John tells it, Mark's Jesus doesn't seem to know everything. For example, he didn't know when the end times were coming, saying only God the Father knows that. Today we are told Jesus didn't even know when fig season was—which is especially odd, since everybody else in Palestine probably did.

In a 1927 essay called “Why I am not a Christian,” British philosopher Bertrand Russell pointed specifically to this story and said if Jesus really WAS divine, he certainly would have known when fig season was, and for that matter could even have conjured up miracle figs had he wanted to. Somehow Russell got so hung up on disputing the LITERAL truth of this story that he missed the many symbolic truths revealed in it.

The fig tree was the most treasured of all trees in the region, especially among Jews. Fig trees were first and foremost the source of delicious and healthy fruit. After the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the fig was the first tree mentioned in the Garden of Eden. The fig tree was also viewed as a symbol of Torah, so scribes and scholars made it a point to read and study scripture under the shade of fig trees. Dead fig branches were prohibited in temple altar fires, for fear healthy branches might be damaged when collecting them.

By Jesus' time the fig tree had become the symbol of the much anticipated messiah, the conquering warrior hero who would save God's people from their Roman oppressors.

This week Jesus came to town to deal with the temple, whose traditions he thought had been irreparably damaged under the corrupt leadership of the Sadducees. The cursed temple, like the cursed fig tree, was no longer bearing fruit. So no Messiah could ever come from there. In destroying the fig tree Jesus foretold the destruction of the Temple, in both cases, for their lack of fruitfulness.

Turns out the temple was indeed destroyed, likely just before Mark's author first put these words to paper. This story was hardly supposed to be about what Jesus DIDN'T know. It was instead about what he remarkably DID know, about both the present and the future. Sorry Bert.

But as for Jesus' so-called triumphant entry into Jerusalem, I doubt it was the joyous pep rally I often imagined it to be in my childhood. These were crowds of frightened, desperate people in desperate times. We've been there ourselves several times in the last year too, haven't we? Frustrated, threatened and scared. As I have mentioned before, Hosanna is NOT the Greek form of the Hebrew words for, "Hip-hip-hooray" or "you da man." Hosanna instead comes from the Hebrew

words hoshea-nah—meaning, “Help us, PLEASE! Save us, PLEASE!” They were not cheering him on. They were pleading for his help.

The messianic image of a conquering hero riding into town to save the people was one Jerusalem certainly knew from its past. Alexander the Great had put on just such a show riding his fabled black stallion Bucephalus into town a few centuries earlier, to conquer and scatter occupying armies from Syria and Egypt.

King Jehu had been welcomed by cheering mobs throwing down their cloaks before him in a story from the book of Second Kings. Jehu rolled into town on his chariot and killed his corrupt predecessor. He purged the land of his family and other evildoers as well.

Judas Maccabeus made a similarly triumphant entry into Jerusalem only a few generations earlier. He was leading a band of righteous rebels who reclaimed the city, and then cleansed and rededicated the temple. Maccabeus was also met by crowds waving palm branches and shouting, “Hoshea nah”...Save us! Please. Hosanna.”

So I’m guessing the frantic Jerusalem crowd ended-up pretty disappointed by this Palm Sunday spectacle. Instead of a great liberator they saw only a meek, humble and gentle soul coming in peace, riding a donkey. To essentially surrender rather than conquer. And after causing that minor stir at the temple, he was pushed around and killed for it.

This was hardly the Messiah, the great fig tree—they had in mind. Although they might have understood God’s overall scheme of things a little better had they noticed something on their calendars. Passover officially begins at sundown, on the fifteenth day of the month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar. According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus’ last supper was a Passover seder, spent with his friends that particular year on a Thursday, which we now call “Maundy” “or Holy” Thursday.

The Passover celebration requires an unblemished lamb, which was sacrificed in the temple earlier in the day, while it was still officially the fourteenth of Nisan, known as the Day of Preparation for the Passover.

The tenth day of Nisan—four days earlier-- was called “selection day.” That was the day that up to 40,000 sheep would be presented, carefully examined and certified as unblemished in the vast temple courtyard by temple priests. For Passover, only a perfect sacrifice was suitable. Since it began on a Thursday that year, Nisan Ten would have been the previous Sunday. Palm Sunday.

So as priests were examining and choosing the most perfect lambs in the temple courtyard, the people were out in the streets...choosing theirs. Shouting to him Hoshea-nah. Hoshea-nah. Hosanna. “Please help us. Save us...PLEASE!” And although certainly not exactly in the way they were hoping for...we will learn in this Holy Week ahead that...in the end... that is EXACTLY...what he did.

Amen.
