

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

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Pastor Kelsey

John 12:20-33

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

9 When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!"

14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

15 "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. 17 So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. 18 It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. 19 The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

Prayer & Sermon

Loving & Courageous God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

We love to see our kiddos march around our sanctuary, waving palms and shouting the words repeated through history to celebrate the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. It is such a fun tradition and moment of life within our church family. I have many fond memories from my childhood of parading around the sanctuary of my home church waving palms as wildly as I could to the proclamations of Hosanna. I may also have some memories of using my palm as a lightsaber or sword or general arm extension to poke, prod, and generally annoy my neighbors in line. I love this tradition, it is fun, it is a great way to include our children in worship and is one of the main ways that we make Holy Week more real for us these many years later. Just like many re-enactments of real events, they remind us of what happened in the past and they can bring up some of the same emotions. BUT, they don't always capture the whole picture. It is surely particularly difficult to capture the full emotional landscape in a short practice led by children. That is a bit of what happens with Palm Sunday. I have always thought about it more like a fun parade like those I have attended for Fourth of July or Labor Day, but as I learn more about Palm Sunday, I'm realizing it perhaps looked more like MLK's March on Washington. Yes, the crowds were excited and shouting Hosanna, but Jesus's ride into town was making more of a statement than just a warm welcome.

I know I have brought up some of the deeper tensions of Palm Sunday a few times this year. We spent around a month in passages in Matthew that happen between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and we discussed the passage that comes right after the one we read this morning last week. That said, I can honestly say that before this year, this year that I have had to dig deeper into the passages surrounding the Palm Sunday event, that I had never thought about Palm Sunday as anything more than a happy go-lucky celebration, a last hurrah perhaps before the grim events to come with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. That said, the deeper significance of Palm Sunday and the moments that led up to it, have made the message of Palm Sunday even more relatable and applicable to me, especially in the era we are currently living.

This is probably a good moment to take a step back and acknowledge that the text that we read this morning tells a bit more of the story than just what happened during Jesus's entrance. The text starts with Jesus visiting his good pal and major miracle, Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. While Jesus and his crew, the Disciples are eating dinner, Mary comes and anoints Jesus with a large amount of perfume that cost as much as the yearly income for a manual laborer. She makes an extravagant gesture signifying her commitment to service ministry of the kind Jesus teaches and models. Contrasted against her commitment and devotion is Judas, who we don't need the reminder in the text to remember is the big betrayer of Jesus. The

Gospel of John highlights another major faulty trait of Judas, he steals from Jesus's own spending money. It from that perspective that he questions Jesus a question we still hear among Christians, but I hope for better intentions than Judas, "That sure seems like a waste of money, she could have given a year's wages to the poor and changed their lives, but instead she poured it out, basically on the floor, into the dirt, at most on the dirtiest part of Jesus." But Jesus knows Judas and knows the intentions of his heart. Judas's heart is not on serving the poor or honoring Jesus but is stuck in greed and wishes for power. Jesus doesn't let Judas off the hook. He admonishes Judas for criticizing Mary's devotion and basically says, "There will be plenty more opportunities to address poverty if that is what you are truly worried about. Mary is focused on the right thing that (because of your contributions) will not be here much longer."

This interaction feels like a combination of a weird interaction with Mary wiping Jesus's feet with her hair and a petty spar between Jesus and Judas, but this story reminds us before going into the celebration of Palm Sunday of what is to come. Judas is already working to betray Jesus and his true nature is being put on display. We are reminded from this story of who will be in Jesus's favor and who will be getting Jesus's rebuke by the end of this week. Those who remain devoted and faithful, even when it means indignity for them, are those who Jesus praises. Those who focus on themselves over Jesus, chiefly Judas, but also those like Peter who will come to deny Jesus at the first sign of true hardship, will have some re-prioritizing to do.

The second part of this passage, verses 9-11 is a part of the story I had never really heard or remembered before now. The Jewish leaders heard about Jesus hanging out with Lazarus, their plans against Jesus were cemented. Jesus, who was already a threat to their power, was hanging out with the greatest miracle he had performed and with the miracle who inspired many more people to follow and/or believe in Jesus as truly divine. The more people that jump ship to the Jesus parade, the less power those Jewish leaders have. It was time to eliminate the threat. We don't often think about these verses when we think of the Palm Sunday story, but these give us an idea of the atmosphere in Jerusalem when Jesus makes his very public entrance. This parade into town was not a risk-free palm party for Jesus believers in Jerusalem. Surely, the opinions of the Jewish leaders on Jesus were no secret, even if their plans to execute him were. The people who were flocking to Jesus and now filling the sides of the streets, were mostly, if not all, Jewish. They were choosing to follow and celebrate Jesus despite the opinions of their highest leaders. That crowd was **brave** to show up that day, it took courage for them to shout Hosanna and declare their loyalty to this rogue rabbi claiming to be the Messiah. Not only did they indicate whose side they were taking by showing up, but then they shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" "Hosanna" alone is a word coming from Hebrew meaning to save or savior. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" is a claim that Jesus is coming with divine power and they call him the "King of Israel" which implies they understand Jesus as the Messiah. They not only are showing preference for Jesus by showing up, but they are loudly shouting and declaring "Save us!" or "Savior!" "Blessed are you divine Messiah!" They surely know what they are doing by being part of this display. They are publicly committing to Christ in the face of the Jewish leaders who believed the exact opposite of Jesus and wanted him out of the way.

Now, add on top of all that tension between the bold commitment of the crowd and the Jewish leaders, that Jesus came into town in a way that he surely knew would stir the pot even more. You see, around the same time Jesus came in on one side of the city, the Roman governor of Jerusalem was entering the city on the other. It was typical practice in that time, not dissimilar to how we still act when major political leaders come to town, to have a crowd to watch the parade of the governor and his people enter the city in a show of extravagance and power. Just as strong arm leaders parade their military through the streets to remind people of their power, the Roman Governor entering Jerusalem for Passover would have been a whole to-do. It is in comparison to that grand parade and show of extravagance that Jesus comes into town celebrated by a high number of people in the crowd, but not the “most important” people in the city. Jesus enters to the calls of “King of Israel.” Those attending Jesus’s parade are declaring the reign of a new King, right in the face of the Roman Governor.

The tension and nature of protest in this parade into the city was not just enacted by the people though. The tension brought to the forefront by this event was not just brought on by the people and allowed by Jesus. Jesus also contributed his part to making it the perfect storm to draw the ire of the Jewish and Roman leaders. We don’t get the full interaction in the Book of John, but it is implied in this text and told more explicitly in the other Gospels, that Jesus particularly chose to ride into town on the back of a Donkey. He did not just take the first or only animal available as may be assumed when you think about Jesus coming in on this lowly Donkey. Jesus specifically chose or requested a Donkey to be his ride into town. This was an intentional choice by Jesus to live out a prophecy of the Messiah from Zechariah 9:9: “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” It was one of the major predictions of the Messiah, that he would enter the city on a Donkey. Jesus particularly chose the Donkey because he knew the Jewish leaders would recognize it as Jesus claiming himself to be the Messiah. Since they did not believe him to be the Messiah, this was even more aggravating to them. Jesus’s entrance is often described as triumphant, but that seems a bit backwards when we think about what comes from Jesus’s entrance, it is his death, not an exchange of power or Jesus taking over control. But when we think about what Jesus must have been intending by how he went about this entrance, it was triumphant. He never intended to enter Jerusalem for a war of power or tug-of-war over the throne of leadership. Jesus entering Jerusalem in the way he did was triumphant because it displayed that Jesus was already triumphant. People were hearing his teachings, seeing his miracles, and experiencing his presence and turning to believe and share his way of living with others. Jesus was triumphant in his entrance because it evoked the expected response, as he was effective in making his bold claims as Messiah and as a new kind of King than the one currently in power.

In the midst of all that tension ready to burst, Jesus chose to exacerbate it and walk right into it. Jesus was actively choosing to contribute to the political theater of Jerusalem. Jesus knew he was making political statements challenging the power and status of many of the leaders in Jerusalem, and he knew that standing by those statements was more important than preserving his life. Committing to his true identity as Messiah and critiquing the ways of the empire while he did it was more important than preserving his life. Staying true and living out his teachings and way of living to

build the Kingdom of God on earth was of utmost importance, more than bowing to the powers that be or dilly dallying about to buy more time. His ministry had to continue by committing in the biggest way to his message. The people who showed up and shouted Hosanna, understood that Jesus's ministry and message was more important than bowing down to the ideas and powers of their world. It took courage. A word from the latin base "Cor" that means Heart. Courage to do what is right, what is holy, what is loving is rooted in the heart. That is what Palm Sunday is all about. Remembering the courage Jesus and his followers had in a time that taking that bold path had enormous consequences. Remembering that Jesus and the crowd did not just have that courage and act on it, but they did it with joy and hope. They shouted and waved their palms and lined the streets with their cloaks and celebrated Jesus's entry into Jerusalem.

As we remember the courage of Jesus's followers and the joy they had in committing to being part of God's Kingdom through Jesus, we are reminded that this is how we should be living out our faith. We should be like Mary and not Judas, perhaps living in a way so devoted to honoring Jesus that it doesn't make sense to those looking from the outside or by standards of the world. We should be like the crowds, willing to stand with Jesus, wherever Jesus is challenging institutions, leaders and systems that are rooted in greed, selfishness, and power. We should look for the places and people that are like those Jewish leaders, doing all they can to hold onto their idea of what God does in the world, to the point that they block the work of Jesus in the world and stop it from continuing. The Palm Sunday story is a reminder to us to be listening for where Jesus and Jesus's followers are making moves in the world, where they are entering places that don't want their influence to change what they are doing, listening so we may join with fellow believers and join in the calls of Hosanna, calls for the work of the savior among us.

I know that this is not the cheery or celebratory message you may be used to hearing on Palm Sunday. Perhaps it isn't what you wanted to hear after the tough year we have had. It isn't easy to hear a challenge to do the hard thing, especially when it feels like a year of doing the hard things. But it is perhaps because of what a hard year it has been that we need to hear this reminder. This reminder that Jesus knows exactly what it felt like to make the self-sacrificing decision because it is the right thing to do. God's people have been making the courageous decision time and time again when things got dramatic. It is perhaps in this part of the grim year, as we look toward finding a new normal that we can use this encouragement to look for Jesus shaking up the status quo and take heart ourselves, find courage ourselves, to be part of creating new life. The people at that original Palm Sunday were celebrating despite the circumstances just because Jesus was near and they got to be part of welcoming him into the important city. Today, we get to know that there is even more reason to celebrate yet to come. We are given the hope and assurance of the resurrection that will come on Easter. Having the courage to stand against those powers and institutions had its consequences, major ones for Jesus and many of his followers, yet Jesus declares triumph over those consequences through his resurrection. Now I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll talk more about that next week, but until then, as we go through this Holy Week and honor Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, remember above all else that the story is not over. The Holy Week story is not over, just as Jesus's story was not over on Good Friday and just as our stories are not over.

Let us pray.
God of palm branches and hallelujahs:
We confess—we love a good Palm Sunday celebration.
We love the sound of a joyful parade.
We love shouting, “hallelujah!”
We love that Palm Sunday means Easter is just around the corner.
We love good news.
However, if we slow down and pay attention,
We know that Palm Sunday was not a walk in the park for you.
There was risk. There was fear. There was the threat of violence.
You were leading a peaceful protest against an unjust empire,
And the whole world knew it.
Forgive us for glossing over the courage this day took.
Remind us that the story of faith is a story of courage,
And even we can do hard things.
With hope we pray.

Family of faith,
Even when we gloss over the truth,
Even when our courage fails us,
Even when we doubt that we can do hard things,
God believes in us. God loves us. God forgives us.
Hear and believe this truth:
All: We are known.
We are loved.
We are forgiven.
Again and again and again. Amen.