

Palm Sunday 2020 A

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 5, 2020

Matthew 21:1-11; Revelation 7:9-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The coronavirus pandemic has swung through our world like a bull in a china shop. The way in which we observe Holy Week is a big disorderly mess, like the shelves of the grocery stores. Worship, such as it is, is like nothing we've ever known before. And the most important worship of the year, Holy Week, has been disassembled, deconstructed. There are winners and losers in this involuntary reordering of church life. And right now, Palm Sunday is a winner.

Palm Sunday, meaning the palms, the processions, the Hosannas. Palm Sunday tends to take a back seat on the first day of Holy Week, as it shares its billing with Passion Sunday. So no sooner do we enjoy the exhilaration of the palm parade than the Sunday liturgy abruptly veers into the last hours of Jesus, which we call his passion. His suffering and death.

I usually don't even preach on Palm Sunday. The liturgy is so massive, and the readings are so long, that there is simply no time for a sermon in a service which would run an hour and 20 minutes *without* a sermon. And if I am so bold to preach, it's a different mood when Jesus' dead body has just been taken down from the cross, and placed in a tomb. The last stations of the cross. It's hard to mount up into the pulpit and preach about palm branches and exuberance. By that point in the service, the emotional ambience has changed. But, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, we can't do business the usual way, so we're going to abide a little bit in Palm Sunday, the celebratory entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

So the Palm Sunday message today is three hoorays. Hooray for palm branches. Hooray for burros. And hooray for Holy Week.

Three hoorays. The first is hooray for palm fronds. Palm trees, palm branches. For outdoor landscaping or for interior design, they always give a touch of glamor. At the heart of the Plaza Hotel in New York City is the Palm Court. All the hotels on the strip in Las Vegas have palm trees. In Beverly Hills, Sunset Boulevard is framed by lines of palm trees. In the ancient world, palm branches are associated with royalty. I don't know if they are royal because they were glamorous, or if they became glamorous because they were associated with royalty.

When Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the crowd is doing several things that would befit a king. They lay cloaks on the road, so that the animal that Jesus is riding upon does not actually touch the same earth as the rest of us. They bring greenery and branches out as well. It's the fourth gospel, John's gospel, that mentions palm branches. Because Jerusalem is built on a mountain,

the people of the city and its leaders would have looked down on this road that Jesus and the crowd were on. And they would have seen this commotion, and viewed it as very subversive, very threatening, very revolutionary. The word “Hosanna” feels like an acclamation but it is literally a plea. It means, “Save us. Save us now.” So the crowd is crying out to Jesus to save them. And they probably don’t mean in a spiritual sense. They probably mean, “Save us from Rome.” Or “Save us from the oppressive structures of the chief priests.”

So all of this points to a crowd that is energized by the notion that Jesus is their deliverer. And all of this is in view of the city from above. And Matthew says, *The whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who IS this?”* Matthew had also told us, at Epiphany, that Jerusalem was troubled by the arrival of the Magi, who were looking for a king. So at the beginning of Jesus’ life, and at the end, we have anxiety in Jerusalem about this alleged king and what that will mean for their lives and their existing power arrangements.

So hooray for palms. In our reading from Revelation, there is a heavenly image of human beings surrounding the throne of God and singing, “*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.*” And those people are wearing white robes and holding... palm branches. So in Christian symbolism, these palm fronds that we hold on Palm Sunday are symbols of our sainthood, of our eventual inclusion among “that number, when the saints go marching in.” So hooray for palm trees and palm fronds. I love dates, and dates come from palm trees, too. So hooray for the palms of palm Sunday.

But I have a second “hooray” on this day. Hooray for burros. Also known as donkeys. I like to say burro because it calls to mind a Mexican peasant coming from the mountains to the market’ with a load of produce on the back of his burro. A burro, a donkey is an animal of the common man. An animal used in agriculture. In the Bible, a burro is a contrast to a horse. A horse means wealth and power.’ Horses are associated more with the military than with agriculture. So when Jesus chooses the animal to ride, it is a donkey, not a horse. And this is connected to a prophet, Zechariah, who talked about the king, the messiah, coming on a donkey. As a sign of humility and peace, rather than on a horse, which would signify power and conquest. That’s Zechariah, quoted in our gospel today, and that’s all in the atmosphere of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. An established motif of what a messiah might look like, spoken of old by Zechariah. And so that adds a dimension to this.

So hooray for burros. I like burros. I should do a Bible study on the great burros of the Bible. It’s an animal, but it represents something. Something different than a lion, different than a serpent, different than an eagle.

And the third hooray is related to the first two. It’s hooray for Holy Week. And I’m not talking so much about the Christian Holy Week as I am about Jesus’ last week. The commotion created by his arrival sets into motion the arrest and execution that will happen at the end of the week. The arrival which is our gospel reading today signals one kind of controversy. Jesus’ attack on

temple really gets at the heart of how his belief system conflicted with the officially sanctioned belief system. And in these days, there is a series of public confrontations with religious leaders in which Jesus generally gets the best of them. If you want to see this unfold, the straightforward way is Mark's gospel. 3 ½ chapters. Mark 11, Mark 12, Mark 13, and the first little bit of Mark 14. If you read those three chapters, you'll see clearly why they arrested him and executed him. Mark gives us a day-by-day account. It's mainly from Mark and some from John that we can actually celebrate Palm Sunday. Matthew is missing one day, and so it seems like it was Palm Monday in Matthew's gospel. And Luke doesn't give any references. But if you read Mark 11, 12, 13, and a wee bit of 14, you'll see holy week. And it wasn't "holy" so much as it was confrontational. And Jesus was more popular. And that's why they arrested him at night. We get into that arrest and the trial for the one out of five Lutherans who actually observe Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But context for that arrest and trial is established on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.

So, "Hooray for Holy Week." Which Palm Sunday definitely begins, and which Palm Sunday definitely frames. There is a lot there for us, adjacent to the Passion, that really tells us more about what the Passion is, and why and how it took place.

Hooray for palm fronds. Hooray for burros. Hooray for holy week. May the Lord of Palm Sunday ride on in majesty, and may those of us who carry the palm fronds follow the Lord of Palm Sunday to his passion, to his grave, and to new life. Amen.