

Sunday of the Passion

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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The Passion According to Luke

Title: "What Is the Difference Between Passion Sunday and Good Friday?"

Jews demand signs, and Gentiles seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified;
A stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles.
But to those who are the called, both Jews and Gentiles:
Christ the Wisdom of God and the Power of God. Amen.

Dear Friends:

In January, I celebrated the 25th anniversary of my ordination. You may not have been here. But cake was served to those who were here. I've been a pastor in this denomination for 25 years. And in those 25 years, I've probably been asked about Holy Week and Palm Sunday more than I have been asked about any other matter. "*What happened to Palm Sunday?*" People ask me. And what they mean is that we read the passion story on Palm Sunday. Like we are about to do. And the passion story is a very intense and somber thing, which contrasts with the exuberant liturgy of the palms.

This question is asked so often that a false myth has taken root among my colleagues. Including some bishops. And they state that because Lutherans would not show up for church on Good Friday, an anonymous cadre of denominational bosses meeting no doubt in a smoke-filled room, decided to punish the lazy Lutherans by forcing them to sit through the passion reading on Palm Sunday. "Skip church on Good Friday? We'll show you!" No one has ever identified this cadre of mysterious Lutheran bosses. But they were going to make sure that you eat your spinach, one way or another.

"*What happened to Palm Sunday?*" There are three explanations. One of them has to do with memory. A second has to do with the church year. And the third and most important has to do with the Bible. So let's talk first about memory. Memory is a tricky thing. The palm fronds of Palm Sunday are a very effective prop. And they capture our imaginations. They especially capture the imagination of children. Children are referenced in the 1,200 year old song which we just sang: "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." The Church encourages us to take our palm fronds home and to display them. This makes for happy, sentimental memories.

But for over a thousand years, other components of this day were clearly about the passion. For over a thousand years, on this day, Christians have read Philippians chapter two. *He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.* Philippians chapter two is almost a kind of creed, encompassing the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The prayer of the day, which was also used for over a thousand years, never mentioned

palm fronds or Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The prayer of the day— which is kind of the keynote for each Sunday— was based on Philippians chapter two. And it prayed that God would help us to follow Jesus and share in his obedience.

So our memories— especially childhood memories— are wrapped up in one part of this Sunday. The joyful, exuberant part. Even though this other part has always been there. During the Protestant Reformation, the leaders frequently sought to suppress or eliminate the liturgy of the palms. The palms of Palm Sunday embodied some of the excesses of the medieval church. Processions. Blessings. Superstitions attached to the palm fronds. Long, lengthy liturgies in which the palm fronds, like the bread and wine, were seemingly transformed into a sacrament. The liturgy of the palms is very memorable. For some of the original Protestants, too memorable. In the gospels, the enthusiastic crowds of Palm Sunday— in the chronology of the fourth gospel, Jesus actually entered Jerusalem on Sunday— the enthusiastic crowds that greet Jesus disappear and are quickly replaced by crowds screaming for his crucifixion. The palm fronds are symbols of our fickleness as human beings, the weakness and cowardice of the disciples. And that is why they are burned to create the ashes for Ash Wednesday.

“What happened to Palm Sunday?” Some of it is selective memory. Another part of it is the church year, specifically Lent. Lent is primarily about the renewal of our relationship with God. *“Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* But over the centuries, Lent had morphed into something called Passiontide, in which the passion and the cross were the focus of Lent. The most grim aspects of Holy Week had spread backwards and had sort of colonized Lent. Lent had grown backward into the pre-Lent season, and had sort of colonized the season of Epiphany, effectively making Lent nine Sundays long. So Palm Sunday, like Laetare Sunday, was sort of a happy moment, inserted into a very long and very somber two months. And so when liturgical renewal took place in the second half of the 20th century, a top priority was to restore Lent to its proper role. *“What happened to Palm Sunday?”* Good question, but what happened to *Laetare*, to *Quinquagesima*, to *Reminiscere*, to *Judica*? If you don't know what I'm talking about, you might consider yourself lucky. But with the re-establishment of a proper relationship between Lent and Holy Week, Palm Sunday, which is where the two overlap, would come to feel different than it did before.

“What happened to Palm Sunday?” Selective memory. The reform of Lent. And most importantly, a biblical issue. John's passion is substantively different from the passions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the Gospel According to John, the crucifixion of Jesus is the hour of triumph. One of my questions as a young adult was, “Why is Good Friday *good*? What's so good about Good Friday?” The answer is that Good Friday is characterized by the Passion According to John. Jesus is the hero of the passion, not the victim. His crucifixion is inseparable from his resurrection and ascension. In the fourth gospel, Jesus calls his own crucifixion his “lifting up.” The character of Good Friday is therefore completely different than the character of the Sunday of the Passion— today— better known as Palm Sunday. The emphasis today is on the suffering of Jesus. The emphasis on Good Friday is on the victory of Jesus. Our human tendency

is to treat Easter as the victory of Jesus. And to treat his passion as an unfortunate setback. But on Good Friday, the passion is not depicted as suffering. Nor is it a setback. It is a victory, and we gather around the cross of our salvation. On Good Friday, the crucifix will be lifted up, as we sing: "Behold the life giving cross... "O come let us worship him." Of all the services of Holy Week prior to Easter, Good Friday is the most confident, the most assured. It is paradoxical. But this is ultimately a biblical issue. Paul speaks in one way about the passion. Isaiah speaks in another way about the passion. Matthew, Mark, and Luke speak in their own ways about the passion. On Good Friday, John's witness takes center stage. Ultimately, Holy Week acknowledges that no single voice from the Bible can completely describe and contain the passion. Just as no single voice can completely describe and contain the resurrection.

What happened to Palm Sunday? Nothing much really happened to Palm Sunday. It is mostly the things that surround Palm Sunday that have changed. The ways in which we tell the story, sing the story, and place ourselves into the story are important. Getting a palm frond, and having it blessed, and waving it in the air is the beginning of Holy Week. A good beginning for Holy Week. A beginning. But not the fulfillment of Holy Week. Amen.