

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 28, 2021 (Palm Sunday)

If I'm honest, Palm Sunday is one of those days when I particularly miss being with all of you. At St. John's, we seem to channel a bit of the excitement that must have marked that original, long ago day. There's always a buzz in the air as we gather outside before the service. Often there's a chill in the air as well. But we're hardy New Englanders, so we bundle up and congregate in front of the church to bless the palms, listen to the choir, and then process in with branches held high, as we belt out "All Glory, Laud, and Honor."

Once inside, the liturgy pivots and we rapidly move from shouts of "Hosanna" to cries of "Crucify;" we go from triumph to tragedy; from palms to Passion. This year, however, we're going to pause, and sit a little bit longer with Jesus' entrance into the great city of Jerusalem. We often move so quickly past it, that the palm portion of the service ends up feeling like little more than a preamble to the Passion, an overture before the crucifixion.

Now, we'll get to the Passion reading; in fact we'll end with it, offering it up as a stark entrance into Holy Week. And I'm pleased that this year we're partnering with St. Mary's in Dorchester to share Mark's Passion gospel over Zoom. So there's at least one benefit of doing Palm Sunday online.

But first, we're going to wade into the crowd that gathered to welcome Jesus. We'll grab some virtual palm branches, crane our necks to catch a glimpse of this man we've heard so much about, and surround ourselves with the pent-up joy that comes bursting forth with shouts of Hosanna and palm branches spread along his path.

The deep sense of longing is so palpable among our friends and neighbors here in the so-called City of David. This Jesus is, after all, a descendent of King David himself. And as such, his royal lineage makes him an heir to the throne. Which is why we're all shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord — the King of Israel!" The long-awaited Messiah is coming, finally, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the heavy yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to shake off the shackles of Roman imperial occupation.

And those chains have been so heavy for so long. The Roman occupation was fraught with cruelty — economic, cultural, religious, and psychological oppression. It's no wonder such profound hope was placed in the person of their perceived savior. The word "Hosanna" literally means "save us!" These shouts were hopeful, desperate cries for salvation. To be saved from the painful circumstances of the present time, to overthrow the cruel oppression under which they lived each moment of their lives.

And as Jesus approached, as the cries reached a fevered pitch, the only remaining question, was how? How would this long-anticipated salvation take place? Would this Jesus come with a mighty army, brandishing a sword? Would he come from on high with clouds descending in a supernatural show of force? I mean, those are the only two options here, right?

So it must have been at least a *bit* disconcerting to see their long-awaited hero riding in on a donkey rather than something a bit more...regal. Maybe not six white horses exactly, but at least a beast with some bearing. And instead of a well-equipped militia, he's followed by a rag-tag group of peaceniks. While the hopes and expectations surrounding the Messiah's entrance into Jerusalem may have felt triumphant, Jesus' entrance itself left a little something to be desired.

After the initial euphoria, you can almost hear the crowd muttering in disappointment as they dispersed. Some must have been utterly devastated by the dawning realization that nothing would ever actually change in their lives. Others must have left angry, feeling duped and disappointed. And you begin to see how, just a few days later, Hosanna, "save us," could have easily morphed into Crucify, "kill him."

But rather than anti-climactic, as it must have felt to many in that crowd, this triumphal entry is actually quite revealing. Jesus' ministry isn't about pomp and circumstance. Excitement, sure. A new way of being, yes. Hopeful anticipation, absolutely. But, much to our own chagrin at times, it's never been about the expectations of others. Or our own expectations.

And that's hard for us. So often we tend to project our own images of what we seek in a Savior onto Jesus. We seek to form the Messiah in our own image — theologically, politically, racially — which is little more than an attempt to control and domesticate God. And that never ends well.

Which is why, when it comes to the nature of God, time and time again, our own desires and expectations are overturned. It begins with the Son of God being born in a barn and ends with him strung up on a tree. That's not how we would have written it up. That's not the script we would have come up with if we were imagining the story of God living among us. Let's face it, we wouldn't have stuck him on a donkey.

And yet, as he's riding on that slow and humble animal with the crowds cheering, Jesus' focus remains on what is to come. It's not to revel in the moment or to enjoy the adulation, but to steel himself for what will soon be at hand. He travels this road with his eyes wide open to what awaits him in the coming days. For he knows where his unconditional love for humanity will take him. He knows that crossing the powers of tradition, hierarchy, and privilege will leave him hanging on a cross. He knows that breaking the barriers that divide people one from another will lead to the breaking of his own body.

He also knows that, despite all worldly evidence to the contrary, human weakness is no match for divine love. Oh, it will triumph in the short term. The powers that be will execute an innocent man. We know how *that* turns out. But it's not the end of the story.

And so the entrance into Jerusalem, with all the shouts and all the exaltation, serves only to highlight this disparity between our desires and God's reality; between our hopes for a Savior and God's saving grace. That's what the week to come is really all about. And I encourage you to embrace it heartily, to walk it fully, and to enter into it with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul.