

“A Palmless Palm Sunday”

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.”

The people of First Lutheran Church had been preparing for Palm Sunday for several weeks. The Altar Guild made certain that all of the brass and silver were polished, the altar linens laundered and ironed, and the bread and wine for Holy Communion was in stock. The choir had been practicing for several weeks in preparation for this special Sunday, and even the acolytes received a refresher course in their Sunday morning duties. Pastor Carlson was working steadfastly on his sermon for Palm Sunday as well as Holy Week and Easter, a time of the church year he often likened to the schedule of accountants during tax season. As this important Sunday approached, everyone was confident that the congregation was ready to enter into worship to the strains of “all glory, laud, and honor to thee, redeemer king.”

When Palm Sunday arrived, the sanctuary was beginning to fill with worshipers when one of the ushers came into the church office and asked the parish administrator, “Martha, where are the palms?” At that moment, a sinking feeling spread throughout the building as everyone realized that in the midst of all of their busyness in preparing for Holy Week, no one had remembered to order palms. It was obviously too late to remedy this situation, since palms don’t grow on trees in that community and other churches had probably ordered just enough palms for their own use. As he put on his robes, Pastor Carlson knew that it was his dubious task to inform his congregation that it would be a palmless Palm Sunday that year at First Lutheran Church.

Thankfully, we did remember to order palms here at Zion Lutheran Church; and throughout the years, I have never had to face a Palm Sunday without palms. Palms have become a beloved tradition for churches on this first day of Holy Week; we wave palm branches in remembrance of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and many of us bring the palms home and keep them throughout the year. We twist the branches into crosses in remembrance of Jesus’ suffering and death on the Cross later this Holy Week, and we burn these same palms to make the ashes that we place on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday as we remember that “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We distribute palm as *“on Palm Sunday people remember Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross, praise him for the gift of salvation, and look expectantly to his second coming.”* ([www.christianity.about.com](http://www.christianity.about.com)).

While the leaders of First Lutheran Church were embarrassed by their forgetting to order palms, they could have taken solace in the Gospel’s depiction of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. While this is reported in all four Gospels, only John specifically mentions palms (*“So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him ...”* – John 12:13). Mark’s Gospel mentions *“leafy branches that they had cut in the fields”* (11:8), while in Matthew the crowd that greeted Jesus *“cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road”* (21:8). In today’s Palm Sunday Gospel from Luke, no branches of any kind are mentioned; as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt, *“people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.”* (19:36). For Luke, the message of Palm Sunday wasn’t about the palms or any other types of branches; it was about the meaning of Jesus entering into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week that would change the course of human history.

At the beginning of our Gospel lesson, Luke reports that *“after [Jesus] had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.”* (19:28). Jesus has just finished the last of his parables that he has taught on his journey to Jerusalem that began *“when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”* This journey to Jerusalem was an absolute necessity for Jesus, *“because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”* (13:33). After a journey that took him to numerous towns and villages where he

encountered a wide variety of people who came to hear his teachings and witness his miracles, on this day Jesus finally reaches his necessary destination.

- “Behind Jesus and the Twelve are Galilee and its synagogues, its table talk and sermons in open country, its seaside audiences and its desperately poor and ill pressing upon him at Sabbath sunset. Now they have reached Jerusalem with its temple, with its chief priests and elders, and with Pontius Pilate who comes on major feast days from his permanent quarters in Caesarea, with ample military support, in case national fervor and religious fanaticism threaten the Roman peace.” – Fred Craddock.

Jesus approaches Jerusalem by way of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, which connects him to the prophecy of Zechariah: *“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east ... Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.”* (Zechariah 14:4-5). Before he departs for the city, he orders two of his disciples to *“go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.”* (19:30). This bringing of the colt also contributes to the characterization of Jesus fulfilling the words of the prophet:

- “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” – Zechariah 9:9.

Entrance processions such as the one that brings Jesus into Jerusalem were familiar ceremonies in the First Century. They were usually welcoming ceremonies for a conqueror or the return of a victorious king or general. Luke’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem conforms to the usual pattern of such processions:

1. Jesus is escorted into Jerusalem by people who spread their cloaks on the road (19:36). The spreading of garments before Jesus’ path is a sign of acclamation, similar to the welcoming of kings in the Old Testament: *“Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, ‘Jehu is king.’”* (2 Kings 9:13).
2. The procession is accompanied by hymns of acclamation; the multitude of disciples shout praises which often accompany the great events of God’s salvation. Their hymn of praise – *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.”* (19:38) – is reminiscent of the song of victory in the Psalms: *“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.”* (Psalm 118:26). *“Praise is the natural response of gratitude and is from those who have witnessed God’s redemptive power at work.”* (Alan Culpepper). Jesus is hailed as the bringer of “peace in heaven” and “glory in the highest heaven.” Jesus’ reign will bring peace on earth and glory to God. Unlike in Mark’s account, however, the crowd does not hail Jesus’ arrival with shouts of “Hosanna!” (*“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!”* – Mark 11:9-10).
3. The various elements of the procession – the entry on a colt, the spreading of cloaks on the road, the shouts of acclamation – depict the authority of Jesus as the one identified at his baptism as *“my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (3:22).
4. As Jesus’ appropriation of the city is the fulfillment of prophetic promises, his entry will be followed by his prophetic act of weeping over the city, his oracle of destruction, his entry into the Temple, and his driving out the merchants from the Temple area, lamenting the day when the city’s enemies *“will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your salvation from God.”* (19:44).

Even as his followers are singing his praises, the first sign of opposition to Jesus in Jerusalem comes from the Pharisees, who order Jesus to rebuke his disciples and thereby reject their accolades (19:39). But Jesus rejects their demands; in responding that *“if these were silent, the stones would shout out,”* Jesus again makes an

allusion to the pronouncements of one of the prophets of Israel: *"The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork."* (Habakkuk 2:11). *"If the people did not cry out in praise, God could raise up another people to fulfill God's purposes – even from the stones."* (Culpepper).

Whether or not we wave palm branches on Palm Sunday, we raise our voices in praise as our Lord comes to us as a king; his entry into Jerusalem *"serves to confirm his kingship while setting Jesus apart from any earthly king."* When Pontius Pilate would enter the city as the representative of the Roman Emperor, his procession was a demonstration of both Roman imperial power and Roman imperial theology. This procession would have included cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, accompanied by the sounds of marching feet and the beating of drums. The procession would have been witnessed by *"the eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."* (Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*). This awesome procession was also a demonstration of the imperial theology of Rome, which proclaimed that the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome but also the Son of God. Inscriptions referred to the emperor as the "son of God," "lord," and "savior," one who had brought "peace on earth." After his death, he would ascend to heaven to take his permanent place among the gods. *"For Rome's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession embodied not only a rival social order, but also a rival theology."*

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem not only serves to complete his journey to the Holy City, but witnesses to Jesus' identity as the true Son of God, the one who comes to "rule the world with truth and grace. As *"Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory, and violence of the empire that ruled the world, Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God. This contrast – between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar – is central not only to the [Gospels], but to the story of Jesus and early Christianity."* (Borg & Crossan). The confrontation between these two kingdoms will continue through Holy Week until it reaches its climax when Jesus is brought before Pilate, where his enemies make the accusation that *"we found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."* (Luke 23:2). In Luke, when Pilate asks Jesus, *"Are you the king of the Jews?"* Jesus answers by simply stating, *"You say so."* (23:3). In John's account of Jesus trial before Pilate, our Lord gives a more extensive response:

- "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'" – John 18:36-37.

On Palm Sunday, the people of Jerusalem had a choice of two processions: the grandeur of Pilate's entrance into the city with a full display of the imperial power of Rome and its emperor-god; or the humble entrance into the Holy City of the man from Nazareth who has reached his destination, the purpose of his life and ministry. It was a choice between two kingdoms: the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God, following the King of Power or the Prince of Peace, devoting oneself to a theology of glory or finding truth in the theology of the Cross. For many, the choice would be clear; as Paul would write to the Corinthians, the message of the cross *"is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."* (1 Corinthians 1:18, 25). Many would reject the message that Jesus' procession was proclaiming, choosing the Roman procession with the power and might that it evidenced. For those who chose to turn their backs on the Roman entrance ceremony, it would mean not only rejecting what the Romans were offering but also risking being rejected by those who chose to collaborate with these conquerors and who would make life difficult for anyone who refused to join them:

- “As the cross of Jesus makes entirely plain to all who follow in his steps, those who seek great proximity to the world must be prepared to experience rebuff: the world is governed by a strange wrath that is most vengeful against those who choose to love it. For, its complacency and conceit notwithstanding, the world does not love itself.” – Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*.

On that palmless Palm Sunday, the people of First Lutheran Church learned a valuable lesson: the message of Palm Sunday has nothing to do with whether or not a congregation distributes palms at worship. The message of this day is the challenge it presents us: which procession will we follow? Will we be cheering on the Romans, the power brokers, the ones who can promise us positions of wealth and prominence if we bear allegiance to them; or will we choose the procession of the humble man riding into town on the back of a colt, with none of the trappings of imperial grandeur. Will we choose to follow the path of glory, or will we walk with Jesus in the way that will lead us to the Cross, that Roman instrument of death that Christ transformed into the means of hope and new life.

- “Two processions entered Jerusalem on that day. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold.” – Borg & Crossan.

For those of us who do bear palms today, the question is the same: are we ready to follow Jesus, and in doing so declaring that we will follow no other? Are we ready to listen to his voice, and not the voices competing for our attention and our allegiance? Are we willing to walk the way of the Cross, through which God “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and have given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusted the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)? Palms or no palms, have we decided to follow Jesus, “the king who comes in the name of the Lord?” Amen.