

Palm Sunday (Year A)

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*Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29*

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures for ever!*

*Let Israel say,  
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'  
Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.*

*This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter through it.*

*I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.  
The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.  
This is the Lord's doing;  
it is marvellous in our eyes.  
This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!  
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.  
We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
The Lord is God,  
and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar.*

*You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.*

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures for ever.*

*Matthew 21:1-11*

*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord*

*needs them.” And he will send them immediately.’ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,*

*‘Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’*

*The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,*

*‘Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!’*

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.’*

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Palm Sunday tends to be one of those high holy days where we sing and celebrate, wave palm branches and sing “Hosanna.” Joy is in the air. We know that we are only seven days away from Easter Sunday when we will raise the banner of the risen Christ. For some of us, today is steeped in memories of parading children, wonderful hymns, and the ushering in of Holy Week. It is, rightfully, a scene of celebration for the followers of Christ.

However, we sometimes forget the tension and irony that is inherent in today’s story. In many ways, the political tensions we observe nowadays are perhaps helpful reminders of the political tensions created by the movement of the Son of God.

This week was marked by tension. Chemical attacks on Syrian men, women, and children. American bombs targeted at a Syrian military site. The “nuclear option” of the senate to change the rules to get Neil Gorsuch approved for a seat on the Supreme Court. The ongoing passionate conversation regarding short term rental regulations here on Shelter Island. Tension is in the air and we can all feel it.

Such was probably a similar feeling at the time that Jesus paraded into Jerusalem. Everyone, perhaps even Jesus himself, was unsure about what exactly this procession meant. After all, Jesus had caused quite a stir in the time before this “triumphant entry,” as we have come to call it. He had flipped over money-changers’ tables in the Temple. He had defiantly challenged the theological assumptions of the day by healing folks on the Sabbath, raising Lazarus from the dead, and suggesting that the Kingdom of Heaven welcomed especially the people that the religious leaders of the day thought unclean and sinful. The Romans held supreme authority and controlled all aspects of life and here is this Jewish carpenter who is threatening their sense of power.

In Martin Scorsese’s controversial film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel “the Last Temptation of Christ,” he does not shy away from the tension of today’s passage. Jesus parades into Jerusalem with his followers, a rather motley crew of commoners, both women and men. Like we have all envisioned in our minds, Jesus - played by Willem Dafoe - rides in on a donkey. People are singing. Palm branches are waved frantically. His disciples are chanting “here comes the King of the Jews.” The music of the scene - composed by Peter Gabriel - switches from a major key to a minor key, embodying the complexity of this moment.

As Jesus parades down the main street from the gates of Jerusalem, he dismounts the donkey and walks alone down the path, heading straight towards a statue of Caesar. The image could not be more dramatic. Jesus is, literally, heading to a standoff with the Roman Empire. A challenge has been made. A showdown is inevitable. A western movie might depict Jesus on one end of the highway with the Roman Empire on the other end, with tumbleweeds blowing down the road and people nervously looking out their windows at the duel that is about to take place.

Thanks to the Revised Common Lectionary, Psalm 118 is always paired with today's reading of Jesus' Triumphant Entry. It is no secret why such a pairing is so appropriate. The psalm refers to a righteous person entering the gates of the city. Its famous phrase, "this is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it," reflects the joyful celebration of Jesus' followers. The psalm speaks of "one who comes in the name of the Lord," which speaks directly to Jesus' divine identity, an identity that was thought to be nothing short of heretical by the religious leaders of the day.

But two other phrases in particular hint at the ominous tidings of what is to come.

"Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar." While it is quite natural for us to focus on the first part of that phrase, the second part digs a little deeper. By pairing this Psalm with today's passage, it suggests that Jesus is heading towards the altar. Altars were used for one purpose, and that purpose was bloody. The altar was the last stop for an animal that was used as a sacrificial offering to atone for the sins of the people. The altar was a violent place, a place where one thing was given in place of another. However, today's passage suggests that instead of an animal heading to its death, it is no less than the very Son of God who is being processed to his very death.

Secondly, the Psalm says the following: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." This sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ, is nothing less than the very stone upon which the Kingdom of Heaven will be built. Rejection is coming. The irony of today's passage is that the very crowds that are singing joyful songs of celebration will, in only a few days' time, change their cries of "Hosanna" to "crucify him."

I suspect that most of his followers did not understand what was to come in the days ahead. You and I have celebrated this ritual of Holy Week so many times that I suspect many of us have become desensitized to the uncertainty of the moment. Was this to be a military uprising? Was Jesus to be a populist leader who would use the controversy of the day to incite riots? Were the people of Jerusalem finally to be freed of the tyranny of the Roman Empire? Was Jesus even aware of his place on the cross?

Such questions come to mind on this Sunday every year. For some of us, we are certainly tempted to skip from the joyous occasion of Palm Sunday straight to the celebratory songs of Easter morning. However, there is much ground to cover in between. There's a narrative to be told that defies tradition, common sense, and political logic.

Jesus' dramatic entry to Jerusalem mimicked a processional ritual that was common in that day. Usually, though, such rituals were enacted by military kings of the Roman Empire returning home after a successful conquest of another territory. The king would process in on a glorious, decorated horse, followed by an intimidating display of military might with his legions of soldiers marching behind their armor and weapons on full display. The meaning of the procession was to intimidate by sending the message that the Roman Empire was the strongest thing out there.

But here we have Jesus lampooning this testosterone-filled parade. Instead of coming in on a mighty horse, he comes in riding a lowly donkey. Instead of being followed by legions of soldiers, he is

accompanied by a rag-tag group of women and men who came from the margins of society. Instead of coming in to celebrate the death of another community, Jesus comes to give himself as an offering for all. The similarity and differences are intertwined to make a most curious statement and that statement is this: victory is on the way but it is coming in a way that no one could predict. Victory is soon to be had in defeat. Life is to come through death. Power is to be secured by humility and self-sacrifice.

Such a powerful and peculiar procession caused quite the stir. Today's passage from Matthew's Gospel includes the curious line that says that Jesus' procession caused much turmoil for the whole city. This turmoil happened because Jesus is offering an alternative narrative to the political logic of the day. To the Roman Empire, power was defined by the number of battles won and nations conquered. To Jesus, power was defined by compassion and self-giving love. If presented the choice between bombing a country, on the one hand, and opening its doors to refugees, the Roman Empire would have most certainly chosen the first of the two options.

Jesus' parade into Jerusalem is the continuation of a narrative that seeks to rewrite the very definition of power. And this re-definition of power is just as controversial today as it was 2,000 years ago. Today, we must ask ourselves, if Jesus' procession took place inside the halls of congress or Shelter Island's town hall or perhaps even a session meeting here at Shelter Island Presbyterian Church, how might he challenge us to redefine power? Perhaps we might be challenged to invest less in tomahawk missiles and more in humanitarian aid. Perhaps we might be challenged to spend less time in our own shoes and more time in the shoes of another. Perhaps we might be challenged to measure our success as a congregation less by the numbers of people in our pews during a service and more by the compassionate acts done after a service.

Simply put, Jesus is parading in front of our faces today, and every day for that matter, and demonstrating a very counter-cultural notion. Jesus doesn't care about our self-absorbed search for personal gain. He laughs in the face of a government that celebrates itself as a military superpower. He defies the religious leaders who choose the letter of the law over the heart of the law. Jesus will soon tell Peter to put down the sword because those who live by the sword die by it. Instead of speaking softly and carrying a big stick, Jesus speaks and acts boldly and carries the heaviest of crosses. *That* is where this parade is leading. But will we join the throng?

Now, I do hope I have not ruined Palm Sunday for you. Like most preachers, I would guess, it is a tempting thing to preach on such joyous occasions by sticking to the traditional sermon that focuses much more on "Hosannas" than "rejected stones." I do not wish to strip such joy from such a story. Indeed, we should be glad the Blessed One is coming in the name of the Lord. Indeed, we should wave branches and give thanks to the Lord, for God is good. Indeed, now is the time for celebration because this parade is a prelude to eternal victory, a victory, *the* victory, that is the foundation of everything we believe as Christians.

But let us be reminded that there are parades all around us. Some parades promote healthy things. Others promote deadly things. We, as followers of Jesus, are called to know the difference between the two. We, as followers of this most unlikely of kings, are called to constantly critique whatever "parade of power" seems to be in vogue. We critique such false narratives by viewing them through the lens of Christ.

Finally, let us also be reminded that all parades come to an end - all, that is, except the one Jesus begins today. Let us enter the throng and sing hosanna and follow the path of this parade to the places

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where power needs redefining. Let us follow this passion parade to the battlefield of victory where the only casualty is death itself.