

This Is the Day

Scriptures: Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 21:1-11

Palm/Passion Sunday

Happy Palm/Passion Sunday, New Hope! There are a large number of readings for today in the Revised Common Lectionary – that’s an agreed upon list of Scripture readings the World Council of Churches developed back in the 1970’s. The idea behind its creation was that if preachers preached on it over the course of a three year period, most congregations would be exposed to nearly every book of the Bible. Each week the lectionary includes an Old Testament reading, a reading from the Psalms (which we often use as our Call to Worship), a reading from one of the epistles, and a gospel lesson.

On today, there are two sets of readings. One set focuses on the Palm Sunday aspect of things, and another set focuses on the Passion Sunday side of things. Passion Sunday, is just a reminder to us of Christ’s suffering experienced during this coming Holy Week. So I chose a combination of Scriptures for us to think about this morning. What you heard Matt read earlier, from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, focuses on the Passion of Christ – His willingness to take the nails for our sake. Our gospel reading will focus on the Palms. I’ll attempt to weave the Palms with the Passion, give us something practical to “chew on” for the week, and a way to apply it to daily living. If you have your Bible or a Bible app, turn with me to the gospel according to Matthew. I’ll be reading Matthew 21:1-11 from the New International Version today. **Read Matthew 21:1-11.**

Prayer: God of our salvation, Thank You for Jesus, who came in Your name and turned the lonely way of rejection and death into triumph. Give us the steadfast faith to enter the gates of righteousness, that we might receive grace to become worthy citizens of Your holy realm. Amen.

What a magnificent, unexpected procession the very first Palm Sunday must have been! Jesus knew why He was heading to Jerusalem. He knew He was going to be crucified – He’s God, after all. He knows a lot of what’s going to happen before it happens. We see that in our reading today. “As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away,’” (Matt. 21:1-3).

Things Line Up the Way Jesus Says They Do

And apparently the owner of the donkey and its colt let the disciples borrow them. Things lined up just the way Jesus said they would. We’re told “the disciples went and did as Jesus instructed them,” (verse 6). Isn’t that the truth? When we read the Bible, and accept it as God’s word – we can

take it to the bank. Not one of the failing banks, either. Over the years, many things found in the Bible are proved to be scientifically true. It's remarkable!

Matthew also tells us, "This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,'" (verses 4-5). This is actually a quote from Zechariah 9:9. To fully understand all this, we have to have an understanding and an appreciation of the events in the Old Testament, Hebrew Bible. The people in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday lived their lives according to Old Testament customs and rules. So they understood what was happening. On some things, they had a better understanding than what we do today.

The image of a king riding on a donkey is reminiscent of King David, the second king of Israel. The thing we need to keep in mind about David is, as Samuel says, "the Lord has sought out a man after His own heart and appointed him ruler of His people," (1 Sam. 13:14). Now God told that to Samuel, knowing full well the sin which David would commit with Bathsheba. David, for the most part, was a good king. He started out a shepherd boy, and he stayed humble.

Entering Jerusalem Like a Hero?

So Jesus enters Jerusalem in a somewhat heroic way – but not in the heroic way of Rome, or nationalism, or violent militarism. He doesn't come riding into town on a stallion. He's not standing in a gold encrusted chariot. He's not in a black, bullet-proof Cadillac stretch limousine. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. On a colt, with its mare walking along behind or beside it. Today, when we think of kings, and great statesmen, we think of them riding around in black Cadillac stretch limos. Or Air Force 1's. Planes and automobiles are relatively new, historically speaking. Usually kings and statesmen rode on horses. Like George Washington.

George Washington is someone we can get behind from a national, or military point of view, right? Washington was certainly both. He had military experience. He was Commander-in-Chief of the Continental, and later United States, Army. He had experience in leading the nation. He was the first President – and only President – to not be officially affiliated with any political party. And Washington rode a beautiful horse – actually a couple beautiful horses over the course of the Revolutionary War – Nelson and Blueskin. You can go out to Google and see paintings of Washington riding them. In the paintings, Washington looks very majestic, even though he wasn't a king.

Jesus is King, but His donkey doesn't even have a nice saddle. Instead, we're told, "They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them," (Matt. 21:7). He's seated on the cloaks His followers have draped across the colt and the donkey's backs. In every town – every region He went to – there were people who followed Jesus. They knew He did great and

amazing things. He did things that no one had ever done before. Like giving sight to a blind man by mixing His spit with dirt and putting it in the man's eyes.

They'd seen Him cure leprosy. People had huge sores, maybe even the tips of their fingers falling off, Jesus would speak, and BOOM! They were instantly healed. The spots vanished, their bodies were as good as new! A woman touched His cloak, and she was instantly healed. Over a ten year period, she'd spent all she had on various doctors looking for a cure. But all it took was for her to touch the hem of Jesus' clothing. He even raised a man back to life who had been dead for four days! When you read the gospels, you see Jesus was constantly doing amazing things – all on behalf of others, and not for Himself.

Vision of a Better Day

So, He had followers. The vision of Him riding in humility gave the common, ordinary people a vision of a better day. He gave them hope. There were people who maybe talked with His disciples and knew where the next stop was on the circuit, so to speak. We've experienced that here recently. About a month ago we had Soul'd Out here at New Hope. There were about 75 people here that night. Friends, you can look around this morning, and see we don't have 75 with us during regular worship services. So, it stands to reason, some of the people who were here on March 12 to hear those guys were people who follow them around. They may even "follow" them on social media.

If social media would have been a thing in those days, there would have been people "following" Jesus through it, too. So, as you can imagine, Jesus is somewhat of a celebrity. He's doing amazing things. People are noticing. So what do they do? "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road," (verse 8).

We had to order our palm branches from Dekker's Flowers in downtown Sidney. There's no other way to get them here. You have buy them from a flower shop. But in that day and place, palms were easy to come by. All you had to do was just climb the tree and cut branches off. It'd be like us collecting pine needles or something. It was easy to come by, and didn't cost them a thing.

Epitome of Servanthood

Just picture the scene. You have all these people. Maybe Lazarus is there. We don't know. Certainly some of the people whom Jesus had healed before, were in the crowd. They're throwing down their cloaks – the donkey and colt are trampling them under hoof. They're cutting and waving palm leaves. It's a marked contrast to the way that society suggests a king should come. If you don't believe me, just tune in to the major news networks on May 6 when they start broadcasting all the pomp and pageantry of the coronation of Charles and Camilla.

Jesus comes in humility riding upon a humble animal – a donkey. He doesn't come to town saying He needs some magnificent stallion or a gold and jewel encrusted saddle or throne. He's

humble. In what ways would our lives, and the life of the world be different if the humility of Christ were to reign? If being humble became our way of life? Our way of seeing ourselves instead of seeking the spotlight?

When you look at Jesus in the Scriptures, He isn't focused on Himself. He doesn't go around saying, "Hey, everybody! Look at Me! Look what I can do!" "You should do things the way I do them because _____." You fill it in. He doesn't purposefully draw attention to Himself. What He does is point people to closer relationship with the Father. He says things like, "Love God and neighbor," "Do to others, as you would have done to you," and "Love your enemies." He takes care of people in Scriptures. He's the epitome of servanthood. "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8).

He "Saves Us!" through the Crucifixion

"The crowds that went ahead of Him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Hosanna in the highest!'" (Matt. 21:9). What a parade it was! It's gone down in history as being called "The Triumphal Entry." That's even the subheading of the Scripture passage in the version of the Bible I read from this morning. "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?' The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee,'" (verses 10-11). In all likelihood, some in the crowd shouting, "Hosanna," which in Hebrew literally means, "Save us!" on Palm Sunday, were also there just a few short days later, yelling, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

Crowds can be fickle. And friends, so can we. Even so, He took the nails for us. He saved the crowds – and us, too – in a way which was unexpected, even misunderstood at the time. He saved us through the Crucifixion. So how do we apply all this to today? Well, what we need to do is focus on who Jesus is. He's the humble Servant who lays His life down for the sake of others. We also need to focus on what He asks us to do – to put death to self, and to live for Him. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Amen!

Prayer: Almighty God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we may share in His obedience to Your will and in the glorious victory of His resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

Benediction: Go forth from this place; take up your cross. Follow Christ in faith, knowing that He promised His presence to all who faithfully follow in His footsteps. Amen.