

Palm/Passion Sunday

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week in the life of the Church. Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday, is an interesting day filled with contrasts. On the one hand, we sing hosannas, and celebrate the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem – which we'll read about momentarily – while also keeping in mind that in just a few short days we move into Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper. Remembering that it was during that meal that the disciples, who thought they were gathering for the usual Passover meal, suddenly had Jesus turn to them and say, "This is My body given for you," and "This cup is the new covenant sealed in My blood."

With those gifts of body and blood, Jesus also told His disciples that they would all run away, and one of them would even betray Him. And by Friday, the disciples had all run away – and one of them had utterly betrayed Him. By Friday, Jesus had been tried and convicted and was nailed to the cross to die. With all this in mind, let's read Mark 11:1-11, about the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. **Read Mark 11:1-10.**

In a lot of ways, Holy Week is like a roller coaster ride. We go from the high point leading up to and climaxing on Palm/Passion Sunday, with mountains of festive palms, to the valley of Maundy Thursday, to the mountain of Golgotha's despair, and ultimately to the empty tomb. The valleys in Holy Week tend to be the things we avoid. We try very hard to resist the valleys we face in our personal lives, and seeing the valleys of the last week of Jesus' life are things we'd like to skip over. Most people, I think, would rather have the celebrating of Palm Sunday, and then simply move into the joy of Easter, white bonnets, Easter eggs, big ham dinner, and of course, the empty tomb.

The King on a Colt

The empty tomb is much easier for us to deal with than the dying, bleeding Savior on the cross. When contemplating all the pain and suffering He went through, it's no wonder that our human tendencies are to try to ignore the events of the week and move into the Easter celebration. Friends, the only way to Easter, is through Good Friday's cross. Good Friday's cross is another story. Today, we find that Mark records "as they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples, saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here,'" (Mark 11:1-2).

Jesus telling the disciples that they would find a colt tied up on the edge of town shouldn't surprise us – He's God. But, I suspect that Jesus' words – and finding them to be amazingly accurate – probably surprised the disciples who were sent to retrieve the colt. At times I've wondered why Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, would

choose a colt – a donkey – to ride into the big city on His parade. We often think of important leaders riding into town on a big white horse – like George Washington. We expect Jesus to be a warrior-king, ready to lead the charge against the enemies of the nation. That’s what the Jews expected the Messiah would be, too.

Even today, we would expect a king or president to ride into Sidney, or the New Hope parking lot, in a black shiny limousine, surrounded by armed security personnel. How would we react if Joe Biden or Donald Trump rolled under the breezeway in an old red rusted out Ford F150? See, an amazing thing about Jesus is that He doesn’t do things the way we humanly expect Him to do them. Instead, He rides into town on a colt – a young donkey. There’s some imagery there, that our Jewish ancestors in the faith would have understood.

Prince of Peace

When the king rides into town on a donkey, he comes in peace. See, in what He’s doing, Jesus is making a statement here. He’s letting everyone see exactly who He claims to be – the Son of God, and the true King. The Prince of Peace rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and instead of peace, by the end of the week, the people were more blood-thirsty than any warrior who ever went into battle. Jesus goes on, “If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly,’” (verse 3). And of course, we know the rest of the story. They found the colt, untied it, and the people asked them what they were doing, and the disciples responded exactly the way Jesus had told them to respond.

The next thing we’re told is that “They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, and He sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields,” (verses 7-8). Can you picture that? The streets into Jerusalem have turned into a full blown parade. People are throwing their cloaks, throwing and waving palm branches. Everyone’s crowding the side streets to catch a glimpse of Him.

And He even has attendants! Mark records, “Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, ‘Hosanna!’ ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’ ‘Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” (verses 9-10). People are shouting. They’re having a grand time! What they’re shouting is also interesting. “Hosanna,” means “save us,” or “Lord, save us!” That’s not something we would typically shout out during a 4th of July parade, is it?

“Hosanna! Lord, Save Us!”

We’ve talked about this before, but it’s worth pointing out again. Their religion was interwoven with their political culture. There are some in America who would very much like our religion and political cultures to be interwoven. The last two summers, Marissa has played with the Sidney Civic Band, down on the court square. When it

rains, they move the concert indoors at one of the churches in Sidney. The band has a sort of tradition, that the last song they play at every concert is always *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, by John Philip Sousa. It's a great song. About halfway through the song, the piccolo players stand up, and play a high-pitched part, and the crowd usually stands up and claps.

Last fall, we were in a church building, and the civic band played that tune, and I happened to glance to my left, and saw a lady standing up, raising the roof. She was getting her worship on to that particular song – a very patriotic song for our country's flag – inside a church building. Friends, having that level of devotion to our nation – to our politicians – is dangerous. Only Jesus Christ deserves our worship and adoration, and nothing else. I know, we all seem to have problems with idolatry. We carry these little devices around in our pockets – I suspect we spend more time looking at them than we do in prayer to the One who came to save us from death and sin.

“Hosanna” – Lord, save us – “in the highest heaven!” They shouted – and He did, on Good Friday. When we realize we need to repent – after all, Lent is the season of repentance – we also cry out, “Lord, save us!” And He does. He hears that prayer, and He's happy to do it. He's already done it on the cross, we just have to accept that gift of forgiveness and right standing that He's given us – and then live like we know it.

Holy Week Journey

During Lent, we've talked of being travelers – Janice mentioned this last week in her sermon. The Lenten season has been long – almost forty days. We began this season with ashes on our foreheads – and now, the ashes are getting fairly heavy. Those ashes remind us of our mortality and the fact that our only hope is in God. And now, as we move into Holy Week, the shadow of those ashes looms large as we follow Jesus from parade, to supper, to crucifixion, to hopeless tomb.

We walk this Holy Week journey because it is loaded with everything in life that has the power to weigh us down and cause us pain. The experience of Holy Week refocuses us on Jesus. He becomes our Model, or Pattern, of how to bear burdens, how to react when we face things which we don't deserve, and how to maintain dignity even in the suffering. The experience of Holy Week teaches us that Jesus Christ bore our burdens in such a complete way that not even death can overwhelm us now. Our walk through Holy Week reminds us that pain has the power to change us, and God's own pain has the power to transform and resurrect us.

And friends, that's good news! Holy Week brings it all together – all the joy and friendship of Jesus and His disciples, and all the pain and anguish of Jesus and His disciples. It brings together all the joy of palms – with all the pain of the passion. It brings the highs and lows of the lives we lead. Holy Week is a time when we see that life is not fair. Bad stuff happens to good people. Death is a reality. Holy Week confirms

all that, but adds a significant word of hope – that there's an empty tomb on Easter morning.

Look where the parade ends. Mark tells us, "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the Twelve," (verse 11). He ends up at the temple – God's residence on earth at that time. His home. The next day, He would go into the temple to drive out the animals and money changers. The hope that Holy Week brings is like a splash of cold water that shocks us. God is at work in human suffering, in the unfairness and injustices of the world. He's at work to overcome these things not by making them disappear, but by transforming them into something meaningful, something useful, something valuable. He takes the mess that you are in, that you and I are – we're messes – and He makes something beautiful out of us.

Prayer: Sovereign God, You have established Your rule over the human heart, not by force but by the servant example of Jesus Christ. Move us by Your Spirit to join the joyful procession of those who confess Christ Jesus with their tongues and praise Him with their lives. Amen.