

## **Sermon, April 5, 2020**

### **Palm Sunday**

Good morning! I hope you are doing well. It's hard for me not to be able to worship with you as usual, especially here at the start of Holy Week. Who would have thought that when we talked about giving things up for Lent a few weeks ago, this year we would end up... giving up Lent. But I know we will get through this difficult and stressful period in our nation's history in due time. Keeping all of us safe and healthy remains our top priority. You'll be pleased to know some of the building projects required by the State Fire Marshal's office have been completed while the church is closed and hopefully other work can begin soon. And I have been trying to keep in touch with you, especially older parishioners and shut-ins. And while I have hoped to make their lives a little better, they have certainly made my life a lot better. If you think of someone. Please call them. It is good for them. And great for you.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, you sent your Son, our savior Jesus Christ, to take our flesh upon him and to suffer death on the cross. Grant that we who share in his obedience to your will and in the glorious victory of his resurrection; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-first chapter.

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." Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.

He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?"

Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'" He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

And yes it is Bethphage—a Hebrew name meaning, “House of unripe figs.” Just don’t tell your friends that up in Bethpage, New York. I confess, I doctored the lectionary a little this morning. I read a few more verses of Matthew than were assigned. Palm Sunday is one of the few stories contained in all four gospels, but each tells it a little differently. The three-year lectionary has us rotate the accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke while John’s story is pretty much ignored.

But the way John tells it, the crowd accompanying Jesus today was made up mostly of the folks who witnessed Lazarus being raised from the dead—which was last week’s story. The crowds lining the streets today were probably there as much to see the now-legendary Lazarus as they were Jesus.

John says the raising of Lazarus was the last straw that sealed Jesus’ fate, in the eyes of political and religious authorities. Matthew, Mark and Luke, on the other hand, imply it was the disturbance at the temple that sealed his fate. That’s why I added those extra verses to our reading today.

As for the differences between the accounts, I don’t think we have to decide between them. In either case an unholy alliance between religious leaders and politicians had formed. In human history, those never turn out well.

The idea that Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem was some sort of triumphal celebration has only been around since the fourteenth century. By then most Christians probably didn’t know about Yehuda Maccabeus and his younger brother Shimon, without whom we miss an important piece of the Palm Sunday puzzle.

The son of a Priest, Maccabeus is considered one of, if not THE greatest warrior in Jewish history. After decades of ruthless oppression by the Greek Seleucids, he led a rag-tag group of Judean revolutionaries against them, eventually liberating much of Judea, including Jerusalem and its famous temple. After tossing out the Greeks, the Maccabees held their own “temple cleansing” of sorts. Kind of like Jesus did.

Judas was actually killed in battle, so the final liberating assault on the city and temple by the Maccabees was led by his younger brother Shimon. My point being, a century and a half before Palm Sunday, folks had also lined the streets of Jerusalem to greet their would-be liberators, waving palm branches and throwing down their cloaks in the road. But these were not revelers celebrating a great victory.

They were instead scared, oppressed people pleading for deliverance from death and disaster from a guy who represented their last hope. Which is exactly what the Palm Sunday crowd was doing. As I have mentioned before, the Greek word Hosanna does NOT mean “Hip, hip Hooray!” Or, “You Da Man.”

It is a transliteration of the Hebrew words “Hoshiah nah,” meaning, “help us, please. Please save us.” They were not celebrating. They were troubled, distraught and frightened people pleading for a miracle. Much like so many are doing these days in New York, New Orleans, Michigan.

Italy, Spain, Oakland, and all over the world. In fact, this year I feel like I can relate to the Palm Sunday crowd better than ever before.

Once the Palm Sunday folks realized Jesus came to town not so much to conquer but to surrender, most probably quietly went home disappointed. They had hoped Jesus would be a great

warrior like Yehuda Maccabeus-- something he was NOT. Apparently never fully appreciating exactly what he WAS. Again, kind of like us.

If you are interested, the story of Judas, Shimon and the Maccabean revolt may not be in your Bibles, but you can find it in books called first and second Maccabees. Those are ancient Jewish historical writings that didn't quite make the Bible, but have fascinated and informed Jewish and Christian scholars alike, for centuries.

While we're on the subject, there is ANOTHER interesting piece of the Palm Sunday puzzle that most Christians probably miss as well. According to the Book of Exodus, Passover begins on the first full moon of spring, making it the Fifteenth Day of the month of Nissan in the Jewish calendar. The Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar with a complicated system of seven leap years in a nineteen-year cycle that keeps it in sync with the solar year. I'll spare you the details. You're welcome. You should also keep in mind that days in the Jewish calendar begin at sundown rather than midnight.

So the Passover celebration actually begins at the sundown that ends Nissan 14. This year that's Wednesday evening. Matthew, Mark and especially Luke describe Maundy Thursday's Last Supper as a Passover seder. Jesus was crucified the next day-- Good Friday and then raised on Easter Sunday.

Curiously, according to the Talmud, the first Passover in Egypt was also on a Thursday evening, the first full moon of spring and therefore also the beginning of the fifteenth day of Nissan.

There are two important days leading up to Passover. The day before is called, "The Day of Preparation." That's when the Passover lamb was slaughtered and food prepared for the evening seder, when all work is prohibited.

And there is also what's called the day of selection on the tenth of Nissan.

The Passover sacrifice required the slaughter of perfect, unblemished lambs that were carefully examined and approved by priests, in accordance with the directives of Exodus chapter twelve.

Chosen on Nissan ten—the Day of Selection-- those perfect lambs were then sent home with families-- the very people for whom they would be sacrificed. The days between the day of selection and the day of slaughter were sort of a get-to-know each other period. Exodus describes it as a time when THE sacrificial lamb became YOUR sacrificial lamb.

With Passover beginning that year at Sundown on Thursday evening, the Day of Selection would have fallen on the previous Sunday. You know--Palm Sunday. So while the priests were busy in the temple courtyard selecting their perfect sacrifice, The people of Jerusalem lined the streets waiving palm branches, and throwing down cloaks; unwittingly selecting their own perfect sacrifice.

And sure, many would be disappointed. Jesus wasn't exactly Yehuda Maccabeus, the liberating warrior they hoped for. Or even his brother Shimon. As I said, they were kind of like us. Because when we are stressed and scared and life turns sour, we too hope Jesus will step in and make it all go away. Yet often what we find instead is the Jesus who gets behind us. Stands beside us. And in the face of adversity, helps us to find a way through it. This is the Jesus who DOES know what we need. And hears both our prayers and our desperate shouts... of Hoshiah nah. Hosanna. "Please Help us. Please save us." And he will.

Amen