

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” ¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: ¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” ¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, we can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: **Thanks be to God!**

John 12:12-19

03/29/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Palm Sunday: Into the Mêlée”

Rev. Amy Terhune

Our lesson today is a slightly unusual one for Palm Sunday. People don’t usually read John’s gospel on Palm Sunday, but given that the lectionary has been taking us through John for much of Lent this year, it seems appropriate to me to read what John has to say, especially given that it follows on the heels of last week’s lesson on the resurrection of Lazarus. In fact, John claims part of the attraction for the crowd is to see this guy who raises people from the dead. You and I know that crowd hasn’t seen anything yet, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

In their book “The Last Week” John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg offering interesting insight into Palm Sunday. I don’t put much stock in their theology, but the image they use interests me. They drew my attention to a fact I’d never considered before, and that is this: Pontius Pilate did not live in Jerusalem year-round. Herod does. And he reports to Pilate. But Pontius Pilate is responsible for the whole region, and the easiest way to oversee the territory is to be on coast. Pilate’s main palace is in Caesarea Maritima, about 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem. As Crossan and Borg note, “Like the Roman governors of Judea and Samaria before and after him, Pilate lived in the new and splendid city on the coast. [This] was much more pleasant than Jerusalem, the traditional capital of the Jewish people, which was inland and insular, provincial and partisan, and often hostile.” From Caesarea Maritima, Pilate can get to wherever he needs to be relatively quickly, including Rome.

But alas, the Festival of the Passover is about to begin. During that time, Jews from all over the empire are traveling to Jerusalem. The city swells to at least twice its normal population, if not more. Jerusalem averaged probably about 75K people or so on average, but at Passover, there could be as many as 200K. So Pilate and his troops would have headed over land to reinforce the Roman garrison permanently stationed in the Fortress Antonia, overlooking the Jewish temple and its courts, not out of reverence for the holiday, but to be there to tamp down any trouble before it had a chance to boil over. They would ride in through the west gate and escort Pilate to the Royal Palace at the Praetorium. Imagine it: “A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds:

the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust.” That’s how a royal emissary enters a city. [information in the preceding 2¶s from The Last Week by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, as cited by Diana Butler Bass at <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-391>.]

Meanwhile, Jesus comes in the east gate from Bethany and the Mount of Olives. According to John, Jesus finds the donkey himself – he doesn’t send his disciples to do it – and he rides into town in a manner consistent with Zachariah 9. John seems to imply that his disciples don’t really understand his choices in the moment – it’s only later that they make the prophetic connections. Which proves they are clueless – If you want to make a public declaration of Messianic proportions, this is how you do it. But there he is, his feet practically dragging on the ground, with the whole town of Bethany running before him to tell what happened to Lazarus.

The great irony is that the people are looking for a revolution – one who will come in and challenge Pilate, throw off Roman oppression. And Jesus seems to check the boxes. His entrance into the city is as opposite as it can be from the one Pilate displays. In place of cavalry and soldiers marching in unison, there are children and families singing and laughing. In place of the streamers and the golden eagles, there are palm branches waving. In place of swirling dust and beating drums, there’s palpable hope and shouts of Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel! Hosanna! Save us!

And Jesus is the King. He is the Lord of our lives, our hearts, our world, all that is. They may have been uncertain 2000 years ago, but we know it now. Yet parades don’t save people. Jesus has come to start a revolution alright, but it’s just that it wasn’t the one his disciples or the people are hoping for. There’ll be no throne, no Davidic rule, no sitting at his right and left in power. He hasn’t come to spill Roman blood. He’s come to spill his own. He’s come to revolutionize the relationship between humankind and God.

The point of this day is twofold. First, Jesus is the king, the Messiah, the one who comes to save us, to establish God’s Kingdom on earth. Second – and this is harder to cope with – is the reality that Jesus wasn’t the kind of king people wanted back then, and if we’re honest, he’s still not necessarily the king we want to follow now.

Beth Quick gets to the truth of it when she writes, “I’ve always thought that Jesus got himself crucified because he refused to be the kind of Messiah the people expected him to be. They wanted a revolutionary, didn’t they? Someone who would come in and free the Jews from Roman occupation. Someone who could be a grand king in the line of David, their favorite king in their history. I thought that they just didn’t get what kind of Messiah Jesus was saying he was. I thought it was a case of mistaken identity...

“But the more I think about it, the more I mull over the events of Jesus’ life in my mind, the more convinced I become that ... they knew, and we know, exactly who Jesus is... After all, Jesus is only a threat, a real threat, if he is who he claims to be – the Messiah, the one anointed to bring good news, preach repentance, and announce that God’s kingdom already is... It is because we believe him that he frightens us.

“If Jesus is the Messiah, then we really are supposed to love our enemies, count all the world as our neighbors. If Jesus is the Messiah, then we really are called to give up the material things that we call treasures, and trade them for treasures of a different kind. If Jesus is the Messiah, then we really are supposed to go where God calls us, follow where God leads, no matter how inconvenient it is, how difficult, how painful. If Jesus is the Messiah, we must relinquish the freedom to hate, to covet, to lead, to own, to control. We like change that excites us, but not change that requires hard work, internal shifts, sweat, toil, and sacrifice. Yet if Jesus really is the Messiah, then we’ve got to change. [3 ¶s adapted from Palm/Passion Sunday Meditation by Beth Quick, <http://bethquick.blogspot.com/2010/03/sermon-for->

palmpassion-sunday-palms-and.html.] If Jesus really is the Messiah, that we have to follow, emulate, sacrifice, suffer, die. Which doesn't sound like saving. It doesn't sound like good news.

Throughout this Lenten season, we've followed Jesus into the wilderness, into the night, into the heat, into the light, and into the open. Jesus will not ask us to go anywhere he won't lead. So he leads into the wild, dark, sweltering, scary places. He also leads us into the bright and open places where we can't hide our lesser selves. I entitled the sermon today "Into the Mêlée". Now, a mêlée is a confused, hand-to-hand fight among several people, characterized by chaos, noise, and close-quarters combat. Originating from the Old French *mesler* (meaning "to mix" or "meddle"), it implies a disorganized struggle rather than an ordered battle. If you google the term today, you're most likely to find the term mêlée associated with large group battles in MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role-playing games – think Dungeons and Dragons on the computer!) But the other place you'll encounter it is the academic field of political science. Mêlée has come to mean confusion and chaos among people who aren't necessarily engaged in armed combat, but in inner battles of a more spiritual, emotional, intellectual or even paradigmatic nature. It's personal. And it's cultural.

Palm Sunday presents us with two stark images: imperial power or divine power. And it's clear that they don't mix. The mêlée results because we want our power here to be divine. We want our issues to be God's issue; our enemies to be God's enemies. But divine power is nothing more or less than utterly selfless love. Human power will always be imperfect, broken, and corrupted because humans are. The palms we wave today will be burned as spread on our foreheads next year for Ash Wednesday. They represent our sin, our confusion, our mêlée.

And yet, Jesus' life, his teachings, his death, his resurrection—they still challenge our world today. We have observed this day for centuries because it begins the week that changed the world. We have to slog through it. Hosannas today, hushed voices in an upper room on Thursday, harsh soldiers that night, hell itself on Friday. We have to walk through it all one day at a time and remember the story—what Jesus went through: acclaim, betrayal, denial, trial, torture, death. This is the week that shows us the humbling reality of sin, the renewing energy of grace, the ultimate power of love. This week, we cannot disconnect one event from another, as if they have no bearing on each other. If Good Friday is to heal us and cleanse us, if Easter is to empower and energize us, then today must make us look frankly at the mêlée in our own hearts – to recognize that our hearts need healing, cleansing, empowering. Today, we need to say "hosanna" – save us! And we need to recognize the urgency.

We are a broken people—broken by sin, failure, compromise, temptation. We need a savior, not a celebrity. And although we didn't know that, thankfully, God did. God knew what we needed. God gave what was needed. At enormous personal cost, God gave what was needed. God heard our Hosanna. God gave us a savior. Because despite our sinfulness, God thinks we're worth saving. And looking full at the mêlée within us, Jesus somehow challenges us to rise above it. Jesus enters Jerusalem then and our hearts today in defiance of all that human nature is, as if to say, "You can be better." With Jesus, there's always the invitation to move closer, dig deeper, go further, love harder.

And so we join the parade, not because we love a party, but because someplace deep inside of us, we share a conviction that where he is leading and what he is offering is better than where we are now; because despite the ways of the world and persuasions of our culture, enough of us really aren't content to just cheer from the sidelines. We want to lay down our palms and all the junk we carry. We want out of the Mêlée, out of chaos, out of the brokenness. Hosanna! Save us! It's not a cheer. It's a prayer. And this week, God answers it. Hosanna.