

3.24.2024 Palm Sunday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

John 12:12-16; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 15:1-39

“He humbled himself”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today as we wave palms and say, “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,*” we are participating in one of the oldest rites of the church. The earliest written record of a Palm Sunday procession and the reading of the Palm Sunday gospel dates far back into the early church. Around the year 395, a Spanish abbess or nun, named “Etheria,” left a written record about her pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Etheria wrote about the celebration of Palm Sunday and Holy Week, and the procession that she witnessed and walked in, already well established, probably predated her travels by 200 or more years. On Palm Sunday, like generations before her, Etheria walked with others from the Byzantine Church that once stood on the Mount of Olives to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

The symbolism of Palm Sunday represents Jesus’ own journey to the cross. Like Etheria, we welcome Jesus with the words, “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,*” and like her, we walk to his cross this week. Today as we begin Holy Week on Palm Sunday, we welcome Jesus the servant king who wears both the crown of glory and the crown of thorns. Like Christians before us, we participate in a Palm Sunday procession that is much older than ourselves. This week, we journey with Christ to Maundy Thursday, as we celebrate the gift of the Eucharist and Jesus’ new commandment “to love one another.” On Good Friday, we pray at his cross of sacrifice for all humanity, as we anticipate his resurrection on Easter Day, already living the new life we have with him each day.

Traditions are important, and the tradition of Holy Week has shaped Christian identity for two thousand years. Holy Week reminds us of who we are: we are people who walk the way of the cross in humble service to Christ and neighbor, and we are people who already know Christ alive in us. Early Christians understood the symbolic importance of carrying palms and walking on the way of the cross. In the palms we say “Hosanna!” and in carrying his cross, we also empty ourselves as humble servants living for others.

Today’s two gospel readings narrate Jesus’ Passion between two moments when the crowd speaks: between “*Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*” and that moment when the crowd defies Pilate’s desire to release Jesus, saying, “*Crucify him!*”

Christianity is not simply a theology to agree or disagree with; it is way of living and walking with Christ in this world, and no other time reveals the Christian way of walking with Christ as much as Holy Week.

On Palm Sunday, we remind ourselves that though we welcome Christ, we have also denied Christ in this world. To those who might say, “Pastor, I have never denied him,” I would ask, have you always served your neighbor in need as if they were Christ?” Have you always blessed the neighbor given to you in the name of the Lord, rather than neglecting, cursing, or even hating them?

The journey of Holy Week continues to be lived out in this world every day. Every day we see Jesus welcomed with “*Hosannas*,” and yet daily, we also hear voices crying out for the rejection, oppression, and even death of our neighbors for whom Jesus also died. Like Jesus’ words in Matthew 25, “*When, Lord, did we see you and do these things to you?*” – when we see our neighbor in need and ignore them or desire their removal, rejection or death, we continue to do it unto him.

These two voices of Holy Week continue to be heard in this world. Many welcome Jesus to their feasts, but few share his fasting. Many rejoice with Jesus, but few will suffer with him. Many desire the breaking of his bread, but few will share in his cup of suffering for the world. Many desire his Kingdom, but few will carry his cross. Many in this world seek to play kingmaker, lording themselves over others, but few will empty themselves of power, humbling themselves in service to others.

Holy Week reveals the contradiction and hypocrisy between “*Hosanna!*” and “*Crucify him!*” that is always lived in plain view in public life everywhere in this world. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians contains the early Christian hymn about Christ as the servant king, who though he was in the form of God, emptied and humbled himself becoming a slave and servant, and therefore, God exalted him, giving him the name that is above all names.

To be a Christian is to imitate Christ in our daily lives by emptying and humbling ourselves in service to him and to our neighbor. In this world, where the rich and powerful often pay lip service about serving others, while spending more time serving themselves, Holy Week offers us a vision of true service for others.

In Philippians, Paul writes, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*,” who though he was in the form of God emptied and humbled himself, even to death on a cross. *Let*

*the same mind be in you.* Christians are people who live for others. They are people who feed and clothe those in need; they are people who fearlessly welcome the stranger and those whom this world has rejected; they are compassionate to the weak and the vulnerable. We are the church when we exist for others, when we empty ourselves with Christ in humble service to the world.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* As he humbled himself to live and die for you, he asks you to humble yourself for others. He asks you to stand up for those that the world unjustly excludes or hates. He asks you to pray with him in Gethsemane so that strengthened, you might resist those in this world who shout, “Crucify them.” He asks you to resist allowing the powers of this world, the state, or any organization that seeks to usurp the power of his words of love and forgiveness.

As he humbled himself for you in the halls of power in this world, humble yourself, not only during Holy Week, but every week and every day with all the strength you have.

He lives in you so you might greet with “*Hosanna!*” all whom he continues to send in his name into this world in need of his help.

*Let the same mind be in you.* Humble yourself and his amazing grace will exalt the work he does in you.

Amen.