

More Than Palm Branches

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is the beginning of what the church calls Holy Week. According to the gospels, during this week after his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus cleansed the temple, running the money changers out, celebrated the Jewish feast of Passover, eating the Passover meal with his disciples and instituting what we call the Lord's Supper, prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, was arrested, tried, sentenced to death, beaten, whipped, then crucified. Dying on the cross he was then buried in a borrowed tomb on Friday evening but Sunday morning the tomb was empty and Jesus had risen from the dead. It's an amazing week, but this morning we focus on his entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of this final week.

Why do we make a big deal about Palm Sunday? Why do we even call it Palm Sunday? To understand turn to Matthew 21 and John 12. The account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is found in all four gospels by the way and we will refer to a couple of the accounts. **“The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!’ Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, ‘Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.’ At first the disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. Now the crowd that was with him, when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him.’” John 12:12-19**

There is tremendous significance in the way Jesus enters the city. Think of all the times Jesus healed someone and told them not to tell anyone. It was as if he had done his best to stay out of the spotlight. He avoided attempts by the multitudes to take him by force and make him their king. But today was different. By approaching the city in this manner, Jesus is saying, “I am the Messiah, the one the prophets spoke of. I admit it.” He was in a sense accepting their recognition and acknowledging it. Jesus arranged to ride on the colt of the donkey because he knew it was fulfillment of a prophecy Zechariah had made 500 years before.

All this time the people had been awaiting the arrival of the promised Messiah and King. Now, it was happening, at least that's what those along the road that day believed. They began to cry out "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel." All of these are Messianic references, phrases tied to the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus, the prophet, the miracle worker, the teacher, the rabbi, is coming. Perhaps he is the Messiah. The excitement grows as Jesus climbs upon the donkey's colt and begins the journey, down the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem. As he does, the people pave the way for him, cutting palm branches and placing them on the road before him. Some placed their outer garments, their cloaks on the ground. Think "rolling out the red carpet." The people are shouting "Hosanna" which means "the Lord saves." Used in this context it was a way of showing honor to one who is Savior. They were essentially saying "honor to you, the Savior." Palm branches, shouts of honor, praise, celebration. But this day is about more than palm branches. Allow me to share three thoughts about Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday is about people. Look at Matthew 21:8-11. He tells us "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road." When he gets into Jerusalem, Matthew says the whole city was stirred. John says the Pharisees said "Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Passover drew huge crowds to Jerusalem so people were everywhere. Maybe it seemed like the whole world had gathered. Some scholars suggest 200,000 people or more crowded the city and the area surrounding it for Passover. Some suggest much larger numbers. Regardless, Palm Sunday is about people. Celebrating, rejoicing, the Messiah, the King is coming. It's about all kinds of people – powerful and powerless, accepted and outcast, rich and poor, the needy and the nobility, leaders and followers, young and old. It's about people because Jesus is always about people. He was and still is. The kingdom of God is about people. All people, regardless of race or gender or position in society. It is about people.

For Jesus, the people were more important than the protocol of the Pharisees and the opinions of the teachers of the law. In Matthew's account, when the leaders heard the children shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David" they told Jesus to rebuke these children. "Aren't you going to stop them? Don't you hear what these children are saying?" Jesus said, "**Yes, have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.'**" **Matthew 21:16**

For Jesus, Palm Sunday was about people, about caring for those people who had been taken advantage of, broken and hurting. Loving them, accepting them, valuing them, blessing them. It was about people.

Matthew tells us after entering Jerusalem, **“Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.” Matthew 21:12** Why run the money changers out of the temple? Because the money changers were taking advantage of the people, taking advantage of the poor who had traveled a long distance and had to exchange money in order to buy sacrifices. They were charging them a fee to exchange money. Charging high prices to the poor for doves to offer as a sacrifice. Taking advantage of the poor. “My house is to be a house of prayer for the people, but you’ve made it into a den of robbers, looking out only for yourselves.”

Matthew tells us after he chased out the money changers, **“The blind and the lame came to him at the temple and he healed them.” Matthew 21:14** Jesus once again, knowing what this week would hold, his own heart troubled and breaking, and yet his focus was on the hurting, the broken, the poor, those in need. For Jesus, Palm Sunday is about people.

It must be the same for us. It has to be about people. Not buildings, not programs, people. All we do, everything we do as a church must be about bringing people to Jesus and bringing Jesus to the people. Jesus came to give his life as a ransom, to save us, to save the people from their sins. Now he sends us out into the world, to tell others about his saving grace. A commission has been given to us, to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have a mission to accomplish. Jesus referred to it as a harvest, a harvest of people that must be gathered in to him before it’s too late and they are lost. Jesus said, **“Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest?’ I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.” John 4:35** The fields are ripe for harvest.

Several years ago Ric Shields was with missionary Larry Smith in Bangladesh. They were riding in a type of rickshaw, an open vehicle, in Dhaka, the capital city when a 3 day Muslim event called *Bishwa Ijtema* ended. It is the second largest Muslim gathering in the world. In 2010 5 million people attended. At the end of three days of prayer and studying the Quran the multitudes pour into the city streets. Ric began filming and praying for this throng of people coming toward them. When I think of Jesus’ words about a multitude and about the fields being ripe for harvest, “white unto harvest” KJV says, I think of this image. Watch this.

Palm Sunday is about people. Lost, dying without hope and needing a Savior. It's about more than palm branches. **Palm Sunday is about praise.** We've already mentioned the children and the people shouting Hosanna, laying palm branches on the road before Jesus. Luke's gospel records, "...**the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices...**"

Luke 19:37 Young, old, children, adults, there is no age requirement for praising the Lord!

They praised him for who he is – "Son of David, the king who comes in the name of the Lord." They praised him for what he had done. The rest of that verse in Luke 19 reads, "...**the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.**" **Luke 19:37** You see, once you know who he is and what he has done, you can't help but praise him! Luke tells us some of the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke his disciples because they were being too loud, too boisterous in their praise and Jesus said, "**I tell you if they keep quiet the stones will cry out.**" **Luke 19:40**

Imagine the crowd coming down the Mount of Olives with Jesus that day. Matthew tells us that on the way to Jerusalem from Jericho Jesus had healed two blind men. Imagine those two formerly blind men leading the crowd. "Follow us. We were blind until last week when Jesus touched us and gave us our sight. Follow us!" Imagine the lepers who had been unclean, outcast, now mingling with the crowd. Picture Mary and Martha and Lazarus in that crowd. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. He's alive because of Jesus. The lame and crippled whom Jesus had healed are running ahead to tell others, "Jesus is coming! Jesus is coming!" No wonder they were praising God in a loud voice. Let me say it again, when you know who he is and what he has done, you can't help but praise him. Palm Sunday is about more than palm branches, it's about lifting up praise to the Savior our King who comes in the name of the Lord! Has he done something for you? Then you ought to praise him with your whole heart! Finally...

Palm Sunday is about presence. Look back at Israel's history and you find the tragic days of the Babylonian exile. Solomon's grand temple was destroyed, the ark of the covenant was gone and in the hearts of the people it seemed the glory of God, his presence was gone as well. The people were waiting, longing for a day when the presence of God would fill the temple again as it did at the dedication of Solomon's temple. They were waiting for God's glory to come back to Israel. The Lord had spoken through the prophet Malachi, "**See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says**

the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?” Malachi 3:1-2

Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament says the Lord is coming back, his glory will return, but then his words are followed by 400 years of silence. The Israelites rebuild their city, Herod builds a temple that is one of the wonders of the ancient world, but the priesthood is corrupt, the ark of the covenant is still missing, there is no prophet, no word from the Lord. The Romans are occupying the land. God’s glory, his presence is still missing it seems. And now Jesus appears on the scene announcing to them the kingdom of God is at hand. God has come back to Israel, but not as they expected. He has come in the flesh, in Jesus the Messiah. But the people couldn’t see it.

The bible says, **“As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”**

Luke 19:41-44

Jesus is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem that would come in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the temple and ransacked the city, killing and enslaving its inhabitants. Notice he says they didn’t recognize the time of God’s coming to you. Palm Sunday was about the presence of the Holy One, the Son of God, coming to them but they would not receive him, they wouldn’t accept him and by the end of the week, they turned him over to Pilate and had him nailed to a cross!

We showed this image last year on Palm Sunday. This is the view today of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. It is such a stunning image, iconic in every sense. The temple is gone. In its place, perhaps a bit to the south on the temple mount, sits the iconic Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine. To the south and out of the picture is the Al-Aqsa mosque. You are looking at the arches that were above the Eastern Gate, but the gate itself is actually now below ground level. This was perhaps the gate Jesus used as he entered the city. This too had Messianic significance as Ezekiel 44 speaks of the Lord having come through this eastern gate. The Eastern Gate was closed in the 800’s after Muslims took control of the city. It was opened again during

the time of the crusades in 1102, walled up by Saladin in 1187 when he defeated the Crusaders and then finally sealed in 1541 by Suleiman the Magnificent supposedly in order to prevent the Messiah from coming through the gates at a future date. To further block access, the Muslims built a cemetery in front of the gate.

Nice try, but someday Jesus will once again enter the city through those Eastern Gates. We can't really imagine what cataclysmic events will take place to make that possible. But the point I want you to see in this image is that today Jesus' access to the city, to the people is blocked, walled off. Jesus wept on that original Palm Sunday because the people didn't recognize the time of God's coming to them. The physical gates were open, the walls weren't stopping him from entering the city, but the people had closed the gates of their heart and life to him.

Today, the Eastern Gate is closed and access is denied. But what about the access to your life? I'm asking you today, are you denying Jesus access to your heart, to your life? Have you closed the gates to him and to his presence? Have you failed to recognize the time of God's coming to you?

Jesus says in Revelation, **“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.”** Revelation **3:20** Jesus wants access to your life, just as he wanted access to the lives of the people on that first Palm Sunday. It wasn't about palm branches, it was about redemption and salvation for the people. It's still true today. It's not about the palm branches, it's about you, your soul, your eternal destiny. It's about his access to your life. It's about his presence in your life. Are you willing to open the gates of your heart, your soul, your life to him today? Open the gate, answer the knock at the door of your heart and let him in because this day is about so much more than palm branches. It's about Jesus, and the people, and praise and about his presence and it's about a brand new life you can find in Jesus!