

“Above and Beyond”

March 25, 2018

Read Matthew 21:1-11

More than two thousand years ago, God’s plan of redemption altered the world forever. The power of sin and death was broken through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ that first Easter. True life, spiritual life, God’s life triumphed. Tonight, the community choir will present the cantata “Champion of Love”, telling the story of how God’s love was victorious over sin and death.

Then over the next week, we will journey together through the events of Holy Week and come alive to God’s story, which transforms our lives and our world by His grace. We begin in our journey today, Palm Sunday, then on Thursday evening we will visit the Upper Room where Jesus and his disciples came together one final time before his crucifixion, for the Passover meal. We too, will come to the table for Holy Communion. At the end of that service we will begin our 24 hour prayer vigil. It was during this 24 hour period, that Jesus was arrested, put on trial and condemned to death by being nailed to a cross and then laid in a tomb. During this part of Jesus’ journey, we as a church, want to be in prayer. Don’t miss this, let’s fill the chart up. Then, next Sunday, Easter Sunday, we will celebrate Jesus’ resurrection and his power to change our lives.

The events of Palm Sunday, often referred to as Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, are recorded in all four of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. So this tells us that this day is very important. It marked what we think of as the beginning of Jesus’ journey to the cross. But really that journey began long before Palm Sunday. It was a journey that began before he started his public ministry. It began even before he arrived here on earth in that Bethlehem manger. The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus said before the creation of the world, God had a plan for our redemption. It was a plan that went far above and beyond what the people there on that original Palm Sunday knew.

You see, Jesus’ journey wasn’t about the immediate circumstances, it was about something that would impact eternity. His journey was not just about the earthly events swirling in those dusty streets in Jerusalem that day, it was about something much bigger. While today marked a triumphal entry, where people lined the streets in adoration; Jesus’ journey was not about human approval or cooperation – it was one of obedience to the Father and fulfillment of His plan for redeeming the world.

As we look at the events that happened on that day in Jerusalem, I have three symbols that I would like to use to help us remember the lessons of Palm Sunday.

1. A donkey (show picture of last year’s donkey)
2. A palm branch
3. A stone

These are pretty common items, but they remind us of the uncommon journey of Jesus. They represent the ways he went above and beyond our understanding in order to redeem us. Take a look at this animal. What do you think of when you see a donkey? Stubborn? That’s what they are known for. If they don’t want to go, they are not going to go. Brice just had the touch last year. Usually, they are stubborn.

So why would Jesus make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey? It's probably not what you or I would have chosen. So at first glance, it seems that Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was just a practical matter – he was tired of walking, there was a donkey available. They couldn't find a horse or a camel, so they go with a donkey.

No, the meaning of Jesus riding a donkey went above and beyond the immediate or the practical. Even this detail, using this lowly animal, was part of God's bigger plan. Centuries earlier, the prophet Zechariah, foretold that the Messiah would come riding on a young donkey. In our scripture reading this morning from Matthew's gospel, we read where Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to the next village where they would find a donkey tied up. They were to untie it and bring it to him. Jesus, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey wasn't some plan B, because they couldn't find a horse. It was a specific fulfillment of God's plan that was promised hundreds of years earlier.

Take another look at this donkey. You have to admit, it's kind of cute. But I wouldn't go so far as calling it majestic or royal. The top Roman soldiers of Jesus' day rode on fancy, majestic horses, as a show of power and position. The donkey? No so much. When Jesus rode on the back of that donkey, he was at eye level with the crowd. But while the donkey represented the humility of Jesus, the ironic twist of the story is that by riding on this donkey, Jesus was also proclaiming that he was the Messiah the King. The dedicated Jews gathered in Jerusalem at this time for the Passover Celebration would have known this Old Testament prophecy. So this simple act demonstrated a connection to the past by fulfilling the prophecy. It also pointed to the future of Jesus asking – not an earthly king as some imagined, but as the true king who would reign forever in God's story of love, forgiveness, grace and redemption. The Messiah, whom the Jews have been waiting for throughout the centuries. Here he came, riding on a donkey.

Now, let's talk about the palm branch. Imagine you've loaded the family into the car. The kids cheer loudly because you are driving toward the ice cream store, and they can almost taste the sweet goodness. But, surprise! You drive right past the ice cream store, all the way to the airport, and board a plane for Paris! The kids should be ecstatic, right? They are on a trip of a lifetime. But instead they are crushed. They were so looking forward to ice cream. It just wasn't what they expected. It didn't fit their idea of what should happen.

Okay, most of us don't have a surprise trip to Europe in our back pocket. But the story gives us a glimpse into what happened to Jesus's disciples and followers on Palm Sunday. They were cheering with excitement. They thought their king had arrived! They could almost taste the victory as Jesus rode into town. The crowd waved palm branches, which were a traditional symbol of victory. This is where we get the name Palm Sunday. The people spread their cloaks on the road for their new king. They could almost taste the sweet goodness of freedom. Finally, finally, their Messiah, their rescuer, had come. Finally, he was going to kick the Romans out and overthrow their oppressors and set up the perfect kingdom for the Jews. Right?

Um, no. the crowd would soon discover that this king wasn't what they expected. He wasn't here to set up an earthly, political kingdom. Instead, he went above and beyond what the people imagined. He was a spiritual king, not an earthly one. His victory- the ultimate victory over sin and death- would be more than freedom from their current oppression. It

would be the victory that restored all of creation and made a way for every person to have a right relationship with God. He would throw off and defeat the oppression of their souls.

Now, there obviously were many people who approved of Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem. They were the ones cheering. There were many who did not approve of Jesus, including the Pharisees and other religious leaders who were threatened by Jesus's popularity. But none of them understood the magnitude of what Jesus was preparing to do. Even Jesus's disciples didn't get it. John told us "At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him." John 12:16

What about you? What do you expect from Jesus this Easter? Are you prepared for his power and victory in your life to go above and beyond those expectations?

Hold up a stone – Palm Sunday is really a snapshot that represents all of Jesus' life: his love, sacrifice and commitment to a greater story, to God's ultimate plan. When he rode into Jerusalem, he didn't arrive in order to raise more support or gain more approval. This was not a campaign rally where he was trying to make sure enough people liked him to get elected. That wasn't the goal, and he knew what was coming. He knew in the coming days he would die on a cross, and before the week was over, that same crowd that was shouting "hosanna" would be shouting "crucify him."

Yet it didn't change Jesus' purpose or his action. Jesus' purpose was not dependent on human praise. He made that clear as recorded in Luke's gospel. "When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

Now, I don't know about you, but I've never heard stones actually cry out. That would seem to be impossible. But that is just the point- the importance of the day wasn't about who sang praises and who kept quiet. It was about all creation, which was in need of redemption and all of creation would praise God when its creator was at work in such a significant way to lift the curse of sin and death and make a way of restoration for all the ultimate good he originally created.

This week, this Holy Week, this week of Jesus passion, what are some of the things we need to be reminded of? That Jesus suffered, and when we go through times of suffering, we know God understands and is with us.

Jesus is utterly alone by the end of the story so that when we feel alone we know God understands and is with us.

Jesus cries out in despair, so that when we become convinced that the whole world has conspired against us and feel ready to give up, we know that God understands and hold on to us.

Jesus dies so that we know God understands death and the fear of death and reminds us that death is not the last word. Next Sunday we celebrate that!