

Sermon, Palm Sunday

“I Want to Tell You”

We have a fun tradition here at Faith Lutheran Church on Palm Sunday. We gather outside for a blessing of our palms, and we shout, “Hosanna,” then the children lead us in a parade procession into the sanctuary, following little Cletus, our own Palm Sunday donkey. We wave our branches as we enter this worship space.

It is all an attempt to recreate Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem; a visible, tangible reminder of that day.

I want to tell you about that day. I want to tell you...

If we want to know what the original Palm Sunday parade crowd was really expecting as they greeted Jesus that day, the best clue is not in the words

they shouted, but in the palm branches they waved. Palm branches were a nationalistic sign. The waving of palm branches was something like the increased display of American flags in the months following the terrorist attacks of September 11. It was a patriotic display, a symbolic expression of hope that this young Galilean who had stirred up so much attention might strike a blow for the nation, a blow against Rome.

I want to tell you about a crowd carrying a nationalistic symbol. I want to tell you that's what they wanted, a national savior.

Shakespeare maybe, but some English poet once said, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what you need." And so it was that day when Jesus came to

Jerusalem for Passover. The crowd did not get what it wanted, but it did receive what it needed. To their dismay, Jesus was no national freedom fighter. He did not arrive flashing a sword and swaggering in might on a big white steed. No, he came with humility, riding a donkey. Cletus' great-great-great-great-grand donkey.

I want to tell you when Jesus came to Jerusalem, the crowd did not get a conquering hero; it got a suffering servant. It did not get a politician; it got a savior. The palm branches which they waved with such serious intent turned out to represent a dashed hope for restored national power and pride. You can just picture the scene after that parade, palm branches thrown down in disgust, littering the road.

I want to tell you, it also happens to us. When we least expect our prayers to be answered, they are. When we least expect God to be present, God happens. Always when we are ready to give up.

I want to tell you, today, as we wave our palm branches and say together, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” when we say, “The peace of the Lord be with you” or “Lift up your hearts” or “Lord, have mercy.” I want to tell you we say these things all the time out there on the road, scarcely knowing what we are saying, hardly expecting anything to happen. And then, at a time we least expect, there coming down the road of our life is indeed Jesus, the one for whom we have waited. Then we can put down the palm branches of our expectations so small and misguided and shout with all heaven and

earth, “Blessed indeed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is Jesus, King of Kings.” I want to tell you.

I want to tell you that today, Palm Sunday, is one of the most political days of the church year. I want to tell you that to say Christ is King of Kings implies that God is the supreme ruler, but not the only ruler. Below God, there are also presidents, prime ministers, chairpersons, chiefs and shahs. In fact, good Lutheran theology tells us to some extent, we are all rulers simply because God has created us in God’s own image to have what Luther calls “responsible dominion.”

What follows is that we all have a little kingdom. That is, we all have a certain range in which our will is effective.

We all have a particular sphere where we have our say.

But I want to tell you that not one of us reigns in isolation. Much of the time we have our say only in community with others. What we must understand is that successful living in God's world depends not only in taking responsibility for our own little kingdom and preserving it if we can. Success also depends on meshing our kingdom with the kingdom of others. Successful living depends especially on fitting our small kingdom inside God's big kingdom, always remembering where we got our dominion to begin with. Each of us is king or queen over a little. God's kingdom is over all.

So, that's Palm Sunday. I want to tell you it is a day of palms and kingdoms. I don't know how you feel about Palm

Sunday, but I want to tell you that it is the most confusing day in the church calendar. It has this happy festive feeling of a prelude to next Sunday's Easter high. The fragrance of fresh cut palms and spring flowers with the stirring sound of a congregation shouting "Hosanna" together.

Yet this day also has the cold ominous shadow of God Friday looming on the horizon. With the smell of death and the sound of silence.

The only way to get from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday is straight through the darkness in between. Shortcutting the pain of this week that stretches before us will only short-circuit the power on the other side. Don't go from Hosanna to Alleluia. Trying to get from the peak of Palm Sunday to the peak of Easter without

descending into the valley of death does not work.

I invite you, urge you, to attend the Maundy Thursday and the Good Friday worship services coming up this week. The Passion of Christ is complicated, but also inviting. So, I invite you to the complete experience.

What do you make of Palm Sunday? Is this day good news or bad news? On the one hand, on the first Palm Sunday, all kinds of people clearly recognized something about who Jesus was and they acclaimed him as king and national hero.

On the other hand, the very same folk in the very same week came together and colluded to kill Jesus. I want to tell you, fasten your seatbelt, so abrupt is the transition from celebration to

crucifixion, from waving palms at Jesus to waving a hammer to nail him to a cross.

We could seek to be content this week with only the story of the palms. Yet, if we are to have a story in which we can live and die, we need the whole story.

So, while I want to tell you the story of the parade, of children shouting “Hosanna!”, of people singing and dancing and waving branches in unabashed praise of the one who came to be their Savior, I also want to tell you that God’s love for us puts God in a place of jeopardy and vulnerability.

Yet God is faithful, willing to risk suffering to bring life out of death. Jesus goes before us into places we do not yet know. He prepares a place for us.

On Palm Sunday, I want to tell
you the story of the parade and
how Jesus has not yet finished
telling you how much He
loves you.

That want I want to tell you.