

Rev. Danny Mackey
Sunday of the Passion – Palm Sunday
April 10, 2022
John 12:12–19
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!”

How important is Palm Sunday? According to our Lectionary—that is, the appointed readings for each Sunday throughout the year—our Lord Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is one of the most important events. So important, in fact, that we hear of Palm Sunday three times each year.

Our first reading of Palm Sunday is the First Sunday in Advent. That’s the very first Sunday of the Church Year, folks. It’s the beginning of our Christmas preparations. “Behold, your King is coming to you.”

The second Palm Sunday reading is about four months later, which is today. It kicks off the celebration of our Lord’s Passion, where our Lord died for our sins so that we might not die eternally.

And the third one will be in about four months, on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity. There Jesus will lament over Jerusalem and turn over the moneychangers’ tables.

Three times, each about four months apart (more or less). It seems like Palm Sunday might just govern our Lectionary. Perhaps those who came before us were pretty smart people. Perhaps they had a good reason.

But did you pick up on the other odd thing about Palm Sunday in all of those cases? We think of Palm Sunday as being about praise and celebration. People are waving palm branches, strewing the road with their coats, and singing, “Hosanna in the highest!” Oh, that’s there. But that’s secondary.

So often we want to make the focus of things our actions, our praises, our responses. We want it to be about us. Look how we wave our palm branches, O Lord. Hear how we sing Your praises, O Christ. I’ve committed my life to You, my God and my King. We get caught up in the parade, distracted by the pomp and pageantry. But Palm Sunday—whichever Sunday we hear it—is about Christ Jesus. It’s about the One who comes to make peace by His own death and resurrection for those who knew not the things that make for peace.

We are to be focused on Christ Jesus and what He does so much more than upon our own action and power and might. And if we're focused on Christ Jesus, we might actually learn something.

In the first Palm Sunday reading, we learn that Christ Jesus came in the midst of struggles. He was born to a couple who had to give up their homes and travel because of the government's demands. They left family and friends and went to the overcrowded town of Bethlehem. A town so crowded that there wasn't enough room for them. Mary and Joseph probably weren't the only ones turned away from an inn that first Christmas.

And, like today, many had turned their back on the LORD. The government was being run by a murderous tyrant—one who had no problem with the slaughter of babies. In fact, the slaughter of babies is part of the system. Same today. That's why the DC police this week outright refused to investigate those six babies who were killed even after they were born. Abortion is sacred to our government. And no one, regardless of political party, seems to want to do a thing about stopping it.

Also, the LORD is openly mocked and ridiculed in our culture. Christians are called bigots and oppressors because we acknowledge reality and hold to the truth. And God's Word is the truth and not dependent on the feelings or thoughts of anybody. Humanity was created in God's image; male and female He created us. But even religious leaders, just like the Pharisees and Sadducees of old (and we're talking about religious leaders in the Church, folks—we're not talking about the pagan heathen)—even religious leaders speak the devil's lies. That which is good is called evil, and evil good. And so God sent John the Baptist to preach dire warning about the axe being laid at the root of the tree.

In about four months, we'll see Jesus turn over the moneychangers' tables in our Palm Sunday reading. I once heard a preacher preach that Jesus had His disciples pick up some of those palm fronds and then Jesus braided them together to make a whip. Whether Jesus made the whip or not, He had righteous anger at those turning our heavenly Father's house into a place to rip off the faithful. And the same happens today in so many churches. Instead of giving people forgiveness of sins, they give them helpful tips. Instead of preaching Christ crucified, they preach empty platitudes to make you feel good. Instead of feeding your soul with God's Word, they speak worldly wisdom. And they're successful. They're successful because the sinful flesh despises the things of God. And if you can deceive the saint while

appealing to the sinner... well, that's why Jesus was so furious with the religious leaders. And why so many preachers and teachers today have rooms reserved for them in the lowest depths of hell.

This brings us back to today's Palm Sunday reading. Our Lord Jesus is triumphally entering Jerusalem. He's fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy. But He's not going to usurp the authorities—either civil or religious—but to submit to them. He's going so that they will do what's in their hearts. Their hearts inclined to evil. Their hearts which want Him dead and gone. And that's what Palm Sunday is about—just as that's what every Sunday ought to be about. Our Lord Jesus is going to die.

So this Sunday isn't most properly called Palm Sunday. Rather, it's called the Sunday of the Passion. The Passion of our Lord is Christ's suffering on the cross to rescue us from our enemies. Not flesh and blood enemies—though flesh and blood are often against Christ, even our flesh and blood. No. Our enemies are the enemies of all people, even those who crucified our Lord. The enemies of sin, of death, and of the devil.

Jesus takes on sin, taking all of it upon Himself. He who knew no sin became sin for us. He gathered all the world's transgressions, inequities, hate, and evil and took them into Himself. No wonder they mocked Him. Everything people hate in themselves Jesus became. Discrimination, dismissal, and disdain—Jesus carried it all in His flesh. And yet He was not crushed by it. Further emphasizing our weakness and frailty. People can respond in a couple ways to such a sight. They can be thankful for the rescue. But, more often, they despise the hero, wanting to tear him down because of jealousy and vainglory.

Yet Jesus didn't shy away from taking our sin upon Himself. He bore it willingly, submitting to His Father's good and gracious will. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed for another way. But knowing that we couldn't be rescued in any other way, He took the cup of our punishment and drank it down, all of it, to the dregs.

Such a draught killed Him. And so He took on death on the cross. That is His Passion. Both Passion as in suffering, but also Passion as in His great desire to save us. We are everything to Him—and not just you and me, but all the world. Jesus died for all of us on the cross. Which we heard so clearly read this morning.

Nearly a third of the Gospel accounts are about our Lord's Passion. It's more significant than anything else in all of Scripture. Not His miracles or teachings. Christ's Ministry, in its

fullest and truest sense, is on the cross, on a hill called Golgotha, which means Place of the Skull. There Jesus took on death itself. Our death. The death that came into the world when our first parents sinned. The death we inherited and earn with our own sin and harm to ourselves and others. That's Jesus' Ministry. And that's why St. Paul and the other apostles were resolved to know nothing other than Christ and Him crucified.

Alas, did our Savior bleed upon that accursed tree. Death and life contended in that strange and dreadful fight. And the victory, at first, seemed to rest with death and the author of death—that is, the third enemy, the devil.

C.F.W. Walther, the founder of our beloved Synod, taught that the devil and his hellish crew jeered and cheered when Jesus gave up His spirit and died. They won, they thought. But we know the rest of the story. We know that Christ's Passion wasn't the end but a glorious new beginning.

Jesus swallowed up death and sin and defeated the devil with His resurrection three days later. And because Jesus rose again, we believe that we too shall rise.

Even now though, before our resurrection on the Last Day, we have the victory. Sin, death, and the devil have been defeated in us. We have been rescued from slavery to these things.

We can live holy and godly lives. We can turn away from hatred and anger and confusion and guilt. We can cling ever more to Christ and His righteousness, knowing that His sacrifice on the cross is perfect and that our heavenly Father beholds us as perfect. Jesus justified us—and He also justifies our good works, making them pleasing to the Father and using them for the salvation of others.

Death and its threats, while still felt in our bodies, don't rule us. Where most in this world either ignore death or panic at the thought of it, we are freed from the fear of it. We know what will happen to us after we die: we will go to heaven to await the resurrection with all the faithful. Death isn't the end because we live now and will always be alive in Christ. First, for a little while in heaven and then for eternity in the new heavens and the new earth. There we shall enjoy life as God meant it to be from the beginning.

And we know the truth. God has spoken to us through His Word and His Son. We know right from wrong. The devil can try to deceive us—and he will—but we can overcome that wicked foe with God's clear and certain Word. The Scriptures tell us what's real, how we

are, and most importantly who God is and how He regards us in His Son. Though we were His enemies, He loved us and rescued us. That rescue mission is what we read this morning, right? This is most certainly true.

So, back to Palm Sunday and the waving of palm branches and the singing of hosannas. Because of Christ and Him crucified, because He defeated sin and death and the devil, because He rescues us for freedom and salvation—now we give Him praise. Just as the saints waved palm branches when Christ triumphally entered the heavenly Jerusalem, we praise Him in response for all His goodness to us. We give Him all glory laud and honor because He is our Savior.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.