

## PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

Matthew 21:1-11 April 5, 2020

The Gospel reading for Palm Sunday is Matthew 21:1-11. I will share it with you here from The Message, by Eugene H. Peterson.

*When they neared Jerusalem, having arrived at Bethpage on Mount Olives, Jesus sent two disciples with these instructions: "Go over to the village across from you. You'll find a donkey tethered there, her colt with her. Untie her and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you're doing, say, 'The Master needs them!' He will send them with you."*

*This is the full story of what was sketched earlier by the prophet:*

*Tell Zion's daughter,  
"Look, your king's on his way,  
Poised and ready, mounted  
On a donkey, on a colt,  
foal of a pack animal."*

*The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, "Hosanna to David's son!" "Blessed is he who comes in God's name!!" "Hosanna in highest heaven!"*

*As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, "What's going on here? Who is this?"*

*The parade crowd answered, "This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee."*

What a day! You wouldn't believe it. It was like a carnival. It was like a circus. It was like a parade. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were crammed into the holiest of holy cities. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims were jammed into those narrow little streets. It was like carnival. Shoulder to shoulder. Arm to arm. Body to

body. You couldn't walk. You couldn't squeeze through this mob of people crammed into those little narrow streets of Jerusalem.

It was Passover time and the city was jammed. It was like a mob at Mardi Gras. Just jammed. And you were there. The hockers were hocking their wares, "Lambs for sale. Lambs for sale." "Good deal on matzo. Matzo here in our tent." "Come and have your Passover dinner with us. Great food."

What a mad house. Dirty streets and dusty mules. Dusty streets and dirty mules. Camels baying off in the distance. Pilgrims chanting their prayers. Roman chariots and Roman charioteers riding back and forth. Just like the movies with John Wayne and Charlton Heston and Cecil B. DeMille, and they were all there. What a mad house! What a mess! But it was a great week for business and a great week for making money. And the kids? Of course—they loved all the commotion.

The reputation of Jesus had already spread. You see, the day before, Jesus Christ had produced the mightiest miracle he had ever done. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He had actually raised Lazarus from the dead yesterday, and then coming into town, Jesus healed two more men, blind men, and they were now able to see. The masses of people had heard about these miracles, and everyone wanted to see if he could pull off another trick like that. The crowd wanted to see more miracles. They wanted to see another deaf person hear. They wanted to see a blind man be given sight. They wanted to see the skin of a leper made pure. Just like on television. They wanted to see the healer in action, this mighty miracle worker. And if—if they saw a miracle, let me tell you, if they saw a man actually raised from the dead, they would believe. If they actually saw a blind man be given sight, they would then be true believers. If the Houdini of the Holy Land could pull another trick out of his bag, they would believe.

That is the way it was on that first Palm Sunday parade. There was that group of people there to see the Houdini of the Holy land in action. It was the Big Top, the Big Tent, a carnival, the center ring in action. That was one group who was present on that first Palm Sunday. These people said, "Lord, if you give me a miracle, then I will believe."...Have you ever been like that?

Then there was a second group of people that day. This second group didn't want a religious carnival; they weren't looking for the Houdini of the Holy Land; they weren't looking for one more magic trick. These people were much more serious. They were looking for a political revolution. It was like a mass political rally, with all its intense fanaticism. Image yourself in Iran or Iraq. And your great political

leader and savior has been exiled in France, and you read in all the newspapers and see it on all the television news that your Khomeini is flying back home to Iran after many years of exile. What a mob at the airport. What a mob in the streets. What a mob everywhere because the great political leader was returning to save his nation. That is the way it was on that first Palm Sunday. There was this mass political revolution.

Then, on this Passover day, when Jesus came riding into town, there had already been thirty-two political riots...in five years. Yes, as a young man, Jesus with his fellow countrymen had experienced thirty-two riots per year for five years. Can you imagine thirty-two riots in Cheyenne, in Washington D.C. in a mere five years? And according to the Bible story for today, they were on the edge of another riot. That is, the town was ready to blow. In other words, it was political pandemonium. It was chaos. The town was ready to blow up with any spark. We are told that three to five million people were jammed into that town, and it was ready to ignite.

So there were two groups on the first Palm Sunday. There were the religious fanatics who said, "Jesus, give me a miracle and then I will believe." And then there were the political fanatics who said, "Restore our freedom and get rid of the Romans." *Both* groups chanted, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna to the Son of David. The king of Israel has come." And that is the way it was. It was a carnival. It was a circus. It was revolution on the move.

What was Jesus doing? What was Jesus doing with this mass of humanity around him? What was Jesus doing in the midst of this psychedelic kaleidoscope of madness? Was he standing up on the back seat of his chariot and waving to the crowd like some politician? Was he riding on that chariot with arms upward and outward and his fingers spiking a "V" sign for victory? Was he waving at all those people in their second story windows as they were throwing confetti on him? Was he pumping them up with political oratory to get the political revolution moving? No. Here in this cacophony of craziness, Jesus didn't say a word. He rode in silence. Silence.

Jesus rode on a jackass into town. The crowds wanted him to ride on a tall white horse, dignified in the sunlight or on a chariot of war, glistening in its golden trim. But Jesus rode on an animal of peace, not of war. The crowd wanted him to grasp a sword in his hand and wave that sword to show what he and his followers would do to the Romans, but he had an olive branch in his fingers. The crowds wanted

him to give enflamed and impassioned oratory to inspire them into revolution; they wanted the shouts of soldiers but they heard only the songs of children. And Jesus? Jesus didn't say a word. Not a word as he rode into that city.

The crowd was chanting at the top of their lungs, "Hosanna to the Son of David, Hosanna to the King." And slowly, and gradually, the Hosannas became quieter and quieter and quieter. Then nothing. By afternoon, another chant had begun, almost in a whisper, "crucify him," softly, softly, louder, louder, and finally bursting with power, "Crucify him. Crucify him. Crucify him. Crucify that man. He's a bloody imposter. A fake. He's no king, that's for sure."

They had wanted a warrior on a warhorse and instead they got a carpenter on a jackass, and so they killed him and put a poster above his head, "King of the Jews." Big joke.

That's the way it was on that first Palm Sunday, on that first Passion Sunday.

Matthew clearly sees in this event a fulfillment of prophecy and an echo of Zechariah's proclamation of God as the king of peace and victory restoring Israel to a position of prominence. This event lists all the people of God, even those who don't realize it. Matthew points out that not everyone was on the bandwagon. There was a crowd, yes, but then the "whole city was in turmoil asking, 'Who is this?'" And even the crowd calls him the "prophet who comes from Galilee," not the promised messiah or the king that such a ritual would announce. Yes, "Son of David" is a kingly designation, but apparently not a convincing one, according to Matthew. It isn't Matthew, but Luke who includes the word from the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," but Matthew implies that the crowd here doesn't know what they are doing.

Yes, they shouted, Matthew claims, "Hosanna," which translates as "Save us." Some historians argue that by this time, "Hosanna was merely a greeting, a salutation for those in power and that the translation no longer held meaning for those who lined the streets that day. Perhaps that is true, and yet, here again it was an appropriate shout to make to the one who rode into the city that day. They shouted more truth than they knew.

"Save us!" they cry out, creating a royal carpet of coats, cloaks, and tree branches for this proclaimer of good news. "Save us!" they shout, reminding us that the stain of division still permeates the fabric of our existence, thwarting our ability to live in peace and threatening our well-being. Almost instinctively, shouts of

“Hosanna!” escape our lips, and we join this triumphal march, affirming our Lenten commitment to self-examination with reflection upon the quality of our lives together. This time of “sheltering in place” has given us much involuntary time for solitude, prayer and reflection. We find ourselves praying “Save us!” for much different reasons as we attempt to isolate ourselves and prevent this virus from infecting us, our families, our communities, our nation, and our world.

Yet we also acknowledge the truth of “Hosanna!”, “Save us, Lord!” as the people in the crowd could not anticipate. The Messiah was riding through the streets as they shouted “Hosanna!”. They did not know that Jesus was the one who would go to the cross to redeem us from our sins and because of the cross we would have the glory of the Resurrection and Easter Morning! Yes, He answered our prayers and saved us from sin and death! That is the truth, friends! That is the truth and answered prayers! Praise be to the God who loves us so!!

*Please pray with me. Blessed One, we are humbled by your example. You entered Jerusalem in lowly estate, riding on a donkey. You emptied yourself and came as a servant to all, forsaking the power to command. Son of David, come to us now and be our King, that we too may sing our hosannas! God of righteousness, this day places a mirror before our faces. We confess we would rather sing hosannas with the cheering crowd, than stand up for our convictions in the face of an angry mob. We would rather dine with Christ at his table, than stand up for him in a courtyard of accusers. We would rather see ourselves as Christ’s champions, than admit to our selves that we too could betray him with a kiss. Forgive our fickle faith, and heal our hesitant hearts. Help us to walk with you through this Holy week, even unto the cross. Give us your strength, your guidance and your love that we may be steadfast as your disciples. In the name of the Christ we pray, Amen.*