

## THE PARADOX OF PALM SUNDAY

Mark 11:1-11

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was preached to a handful of people under COVID-19 restrictions and livestreamed.*

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*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

*“Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

*Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

For at least the last few decades it has been common for the Sunday we have traditionally known as Palm Sunday to move toward a focus on the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Christ following the joyful adulation with which he was greeted as he rode into Jerusalem. Often Palm Sunday services have begun with a procession of palms but ended with more than a nod to the pain of the passion to come. Its official name is now Palm/Passion Sunday.

There is good theological and practical rationale behind this move from Palms to Passion. Several decades ago, it was not uncommon for churches to offer services at noon every day during Holy Week. Those have pretty much gone by the wayside, and even Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services are less attended. In this situation, it is better to bring elements of the suffering and death of Christ into Palm Sunday worship so that the congregation doesn’t go from the joy of a procession of palms to the joy of resurrection without the death of Christ in between. A comment spoken at the seminary I attended following a tragic situation captures this wisdom: “It takes a death to have a resurrection.” A nod toward death on Palm Sunday begins to prepare us for the joy that comes with Easter.

But today I am going to focus on Palm Sunday – specifically on the crowd who greeted Jesus with cries of “Hosanna!” on Sunday but whose cries morphed into “Crucify him!” by Thursday. In a matter of four days the crowd moved from joy to anger, from welcome to outrage, from celebration to vengeance. And it moved as one mind: intense, emotional, passionate.

### I.

I focus on the intensity of the crowd in the context of a city and nation aware of highly charged emotions – the rush of adrenaline – that arises within our political culture. While the analogy is not perfect – no analogies are

– the intensity of emotion expressed by the crowd that welcomes Jesus to Jerusalem is not dissimilar from the highly charged emotions that have arisen around elections to federal offices in our nation for more than a decade. The hopes greeting Jesus bore much in common with the hopes that have been played up – and in many ways cultivated by – those who have run for the highest offices in our land. The intensity of expectation that greeted Jesus as Messiah is of similar temperature as that which surrounded Presidents elected in our nation, at least in 2008 and 2016.

An article I read this week by a political philosopher early in his career describes some of the similarity of intensity that greeted Presidents Obama and Trump. Jon Baskin shares his observations of these two elections:

In 2009...Barack Obama delivered his inauguration speech in Washington, D.C. A graduate student in Chicago at the time, I had followed the campaign closely, and the soaring vision of America he presented that day was familiar—but no less satisfying for that. I was glad to hear... that “the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply.” I was inspired by the idea that America was “bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions, greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.” I nodded hopefully when it was prophesied that “the old hatreds” were on the verge of passing.

Eight years later, Donald Trump delivered what, at first glance, seemed like a very different kind of inauguration speech. To be sure, there was little in his evocation of “American carnage” that made me nod or feel hopeful. But Trump, as he made perfectly clear, was not talking to me. He was talking to “the forgotten men and women of our country” who would be “forgotten no longer.” And if you felt yourself to be one of those men and women, that speech was every bit as messianic as Obama’s. Rather than in the hoped-for future, the prototype for Trump’s utopia lay in the barely remembered past. But that past was recoverable. “We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back our dreams,” Trump intoned. And when we did, a “new national pride” would “stir ourselves, lift our sights and heal our divisions.”<sup>1</sup>

As different as these two Presidents were, when I read Baskin’s article, I thought it captured the *intensity of expectation* that both received from their supporters and from others as well. To their followers, both Presidents Obama and Trump were seen as deliverers.

## II.

If you attended worship as a child, you probably came away with some sense of the *intensity* that greeted Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Mark writes:

*Then those who went ahead [of Jesus] and those who followed were shouting,*

*Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*’

These words were not new to the first-century crowd. They echo Psalm 118, a psalm used for the *coronation of kings* in Israel for nearly a millennium:

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Baskin, “Our Ideal Theories,” *The Point*, March 24, 2021. Available at <https://thepointmag.com/letter/on-ideal-theories/>.

*Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!  
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord...  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
Up to the horns of the altar.<sup>2</sup>*

We realize the *poignancy* and *communal* nature of this *intensity* that greeted Jesus on Palm Sunday when we note that the city in which it arises was the same city in which, a thousand years earlier, King David – the greatest king in Israel’s history – had, after his defeat at the hands of his son Absalom, ascended  
*the Mount of Olives,  
weeping as he went,  
with his head covered and walking barefoot...*

and that on that occasion of national humiliation  
*all the people who were with him [had] covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went.*<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the Temple Jesus soon enters<sup>4</sup> to cleanse had been *rebuilt* only *sixty years earlier* after lying *dormant* and *destroyed* for *five hundred years*.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when Christ rides into Jerusalem he enters the city of one of Israel’s great military *defeats* – the loss to Absalom – and when he enters the Temple he enters a *monument* to one of its greatest *spiritual and national traumas*. Do you remember how you felt when you saw Notre Dame burning?

Yet Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem also occurs during a time of *high expectation of deliverance from Roman rule* under which the current population of Jerusalem now lives. The prophet Zechariah:

*On that day there shall not be either cold or frost.  
And there shall be continuous day...  
On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem...  
It shall continue in summer as in winter.  
And the Lord will become king over all the earth...  
...Jerusalem shall remain aloft on its site...inhabited...  
Never again...doomed to destruction...  
And secure.<sup>6</sup>*

I know this has been a lot of Biblical material to absorb these few minutes, but what is shown is that from the *psalmist*, from the *historian* of King David, from the *prophet* Zechariah: the people who waved palm branches and shouted “Hosanna” and lay cloaks on the road in front of Jesus were sensing *military victory*, *overthrow* of their Roman rulers, *restoration* of their King to their throne, national *renewal*, national *revival*, national *rehabilitation*, national *purpose*, national *prosperity*, national *glory*, national *triumph*. Their emotions were *intense* because their hopes and dreams were *bright* after centuries of pain and humiliation.

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!*

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:25-27.

<sup>3</sup> See II Samuel 15:13-31.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 11:15-19.

<sup>5</sup> II Kings 25:1-7; II Chronicles 36:12; Jeremiah 32:4-5; 34:2-3; 39:1-7; 52:4-11.

<sup>6</sup> Zechariah 14:6-10.

### III.

But amid their clamor and adoration, their expectation and hope, when the crowd took notice – really took notice of Jesus – they saw he was riding on a *colt*, a simple, small foal of a donkey, a newborn baby. Again, Zechariah:

*Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*<sup>7</sup>

This is royal rule? This is Messiahship? This is restoration of national power?

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All this clamor occurred on Sunday. By Thursday Jesus was arrested. At his trial, some of those same citizens who had welcomed him with Hosanna! now chanted “Crucify him!”<sup>8</sup> By the time he was led away to the cross later that night *every one* of his own disciples had *abandoned* him.<sup>9</sup> When he died on Friday, not one of them were present to hear his cry from the cross: “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”<sup>10</sup>

Humble and riding on a colt. Dying alone and abandoned. Neither friend nor family within hearing distance of his last breath. And it wasn’t due to COVID restrictions.

### IV.

As *re-defined* and *re-imagined* by Jesus Christ: This is in fact Messiahship. This is Royal Rule. This is God-with-us.

*Humble and riding on a donkey,  
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

This is why and how the *power* of Jesus Christ is *different* from any *military* or *political* power we seek or have or dream of or rule by.

*Humble and riding on a donkey.*

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Earlier this year I read a lengthy history of Christianity from a British author named Tom Holland.<sup>11</sup> At the time he undertook writing this history, he was not a person of faith. But in the course of his research, he changed his mind. As he studied Christian history, he saw that the enlightened, rational, humane heritage in which he had been raised and trained “derives ultimately from claims made in the Bible,” claims such as

- That humans are made in *God’s* image
- That God’s Son died *equally for everyone*
- That there is *neither* Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...

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<sup>7</sup> Zechariah 9:9.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 15:6-15.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 14:50, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 15:33-41.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books: 2019).

As Holland studied Christianity, despite its many instances of violence and oppression and bigotry and exclusiveness, he came to realize that:

- At its core, Christianity contains the aspiration to *enfold* within its embrace *every* other possible way of seeing the world
- At its core, Christianity contains the claim to a *universalism* that was culturally highly specific
- At its core, Christianity contains [and unleashes] the belief
  - that human beings have *rights*
  - that they are *born equal*
  - that they are owed *sustenance*, and *shelter*, and *refuge* from persecution... [racial, ethnic, religious, sexual].

Despite the claim of our *Declaration of Independence*, Holland is not ready to say that these affirmations are “self-evident truths”; rather, he sees them *originating* with the *Scriptures* given to and forming first with Judaism and then Christianity across millennia.

Christian faith came to this *secular* writer from the way Jesus Christ *redefines* what it means to be Messiah, what it means to *hold power*.

It is the audacity of it [Holland writes] the audacity of finding in a *twisted and defeated corpse* the *glory of the creator* of the universe...<sup>12</sup>

*humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

## V.

Good people of Westminster, slowly venturing back to this place of worship as this pandemic begins to level off with vaccinations available:

- The essence of Christian belief is not the *adulation* Christ receives on Palm Sunday but the *humility* he shows on that loud procession.
- The essence of Christianity is “strength through weakness” – the Paradox of Palm Sunday

When we step into this paradox – like any new world into which we step – we will learn through our life within its twists and turns, its twirl and swirl, what this author learned:

- That the earth and *all* its creatures –
  - Great and small
  - Close by and far away
  - Kin and stranger

are *our* joyful responsibility and we, theirs.

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> All quotes come from the concluding pages: 539-542.