

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Palm Sunday

How linear has your journey gone? Meaning, did you start out and from your starting point your trajectory followed in a straight line moving in the direction of advancement, and of the fulfillment of plans and dreams? Or has your trajectory been more complicated than that? Ups and downs? Moments when you did not know if it has anywhere good to go? Moments when life took new directions?

I ask these questions because as I consider Palm Sunday and the different gospel accounts of that moment, there is so much going on. It is a moment that garnishes and ignites hopes and expectations, a moment that rides generations of prophetic hope, that causes people to shout and wave branches and lay down their cloaks in honor and in signal that they believe. It is a momentous moment and rightfully so. But even as these expectations are ignited, I cringe a little, because there are going to be some serious ups and downs, some dramatic twists and turns between that moment and a week later.

I cringe because that drop from hopes and dreams that feel alive to watching it all unravel is a hard one. Have you ever felt it? Have you gone through such things? And in that moment of unraveling, it is a dark, confusing, and sad moment. But if you've been through it, you know life does reemerge.

You see, my experience is, and my working assumption is that these events of Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter are not just historical events, but these events map out a contour that our own journey takes. Palm Sunday represents those high moments of hope, when you are sure things are gonna happen, and happen as you planned. And the good news of this for those who have experienced those dashed hopes and loss of ideals that sometimes comes after, that when we go through the darkness of good Friday, the story is not over, but after that comes the resurgence of new life.

Now we don't always see it and take hope in it when it is happening. It often takes some distance and retrospection to begin to make sense of what happened, to make sense of these patterns and rhythms. It takes time. It takes perspective in order to understand what happened and how life was transformed in those moments.

Most of us are victims of the retrospect. Most of us see choices clearer in hindsight. Most of us think we would make wiser choices if we had another shot, if we could go back and do it again knowing what we know now. For most of us, new directions, new starts, new paradigms, transformations of life and perspective, these come upon us without welcome or anticipation. They come because of a break. They come because our plans fall apart, because of some unexpected turn, some unanticipated trauma, some set of events we didn't account for or know how to respond to.

If left up to us, we would most often choose that which is familiar, that which we recognize. What is familiar to us, what we have become accustomed to. And in many ways, the jubilation of Palm Sunday is a reaction out of tradition, and familiar expectations. So, it is profound when one can see in foresight. When one can feel and see the currents of culture and expectation, and yet make a conscious choice for a more fruitful way. When one can feel and discern the forces at play and make a conscious choice even if it goes against the grain, even if it brings sacrifice and loss.

It is profound when one can detect the forces wanting to shape their decisions, and yet they are able to make their own. That is one thing we celebrate as we remember Jesus' forty days in the wilderness and Satan's tempting offers to Jesus, where Jesus does exactly this – he is able to detect the forces wanting to shape his decisions, forces that we might feel coming from without or welling up from within – and he is able to make his own decisions about his ministry, about redemption.

Jesus tapped into political expectations. When Jesus talked about redeeming Israel, many assumed they knew what he meant. They grew fervent and expectant. They assumed redemption meant reclaiming sovereignty, self-rule, forcing out the Romans. When they heard messiah – one who saves, they assumed he was a champion as of old, one who would lead them proud and strong. This seems to be why they waved palms, why they threw down their cloaks. Because they proclaimed their hope that he was the one to save, the one to redeem, the one to make Israel great again. And if Jesus is guilty, he is guilty of feeding those expectations when he climbed on that donkey and rode it into Jerusalem. For he did see himself as messiah, savior, just not in the way the crowds could conceive of, at least not yet.

Jesus *was* interested in redemption. But the peace, and wholeness and hope and forgiveness of the past that Jesus envisioned would not come from the strategy of

zealots, from wresting power, and proclaiming self-rule. Jesus chooses a different way. A way that we could not have anticipated, one that we did not have the imagination for, one which we might only muster the imagination for in retrospect.

Jesus began something new by redeeming the past, by reinterpreting God's love and promises. Jesus undermined the establishment by painting a new picture of what it could mean to Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus reclaimed the tradition, reclaimed the law, reclaimed the scriptures, the heart of God, and the promises of a people loving the Lord in the land. He reclaimed the promise of redemption, of forgiveness when he sat at table with the blind and the lame, and the tax collector and the prostitute. He reclaimed the hope of new life growing within and a covenant like Jeremiah prophesied, one written on the heart.

But when given the choice, the religious leaders who crafted the headlines, and the people who consumed those headlines with their breakfast, in the days to follow that entry into Jerusalem – they chose what they knew. They chose what they had been conditioned to expect. They looked for a zealot. They looked for one who would redeem by force, who would be a champion of sorts, one as of old. So, in the hours to come, when things get tense, when they have the choice between Jesus Barabbas, a well known zealot, and Jesus of Nazareth who was willing to take on their violence, to take on suffering, take on the curse, they chose Barabbas instead. Give us Barabbas, and let us be done with this so-called messiah.

Who would you have voted for? Would you have joined the crowds that cheered for Barrabas to be freed? Like we who are prone to celebrate the candidate we think can promise us prosperity, or security or lower taxes.

We lack foresight, and that I often grieve. I grieve that we often have to undergo illness in order to be sensitive to those who have endured illness. We often are not fully supportive of the challenges of other peoples' children until it is our own children. We often are not as sensitive to the experience of refugees who have fled or undergone terror of one kind or another, because we have not had to undergo it ourselves. Instead, we are consumed with our own fears, needs, thoughts, desires. We lack foresight. We lack the imagination of other's experiences, or the imagination of a better way.

But praise be to the God who has had foresight for us. Who has redeemed us while we were still sinners. Who continued his path for redemption, who knew his calling with clarity amidst all the confusing elements, even when the crowds

shouted for a different messiah. Even when the leaders and the crowds who followed them offered him up to a torturous death rather than follow his redemptive way. Praise be to the God who knows our precious and broken hearts. Praise be to the God who knows a peace that grows from within, who writes a covenant with us, not written on stone, but on the flesh of our hearts. Praise be to the Christ who did not take the bait of power and prestige, or showmanship. Praise be to the Christ who was willing to bear the rage of those who did not understand, to bear the rejection by those he came to redeem, and for those he would still redeem despite their response.

For us, recognition of God's great plan of redemption and love comes in retrospect. Our understanding of how God is working it out in our lives and journeys usually comes in hindsight, a hindsight that get clearer with each cycle of winter and spring, with each cycle of loss and new life, with each season of growth and journeying with the Christ. So, as we look in hindsight, we give praise for the one who has loved and redeemed us with foresight, and we pray that as we seek to walk in step with our loving savior, we might eventually pick up on his rhythms and his choices, and maybe over time we might start to anticipate and imagine what he would see and do in the moment, and not be relegated to the always-late-in-coming perspective of hindsight.

And all God's people said...

*Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem*

**Mark 11** When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” <sup>4</sup>They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

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

<sup>10</sup> Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

<sup>11</sup> 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.