

## **Palm Sunday, COVID-19, 2020:**

People of God! Let's begin with prayer.

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***Palm Sunday: The Set Up***

Think again about the passage that was read to us. It was a Palm Sunday passage. Jesus sends the two nameless disciples for a donkey he's never seen, which is a miracle. And he tells these two to say to the owner of the donkey that the Lord needs it--the only time Jesus uses the term, a term used throughout the ancient Greek text of the Bible for God.

And this whole donkey thing is a reference to a passage in Zechariah 9. A passage where Jerusalem is told to rejoice, because their king is coming to them riding on a donkey. But not coming in military might, as a war-lord, as the Romans always come, but in a different way, humbly, to disarm the powers that be, not overthrow them with catapults and starvation and death.

We read in Zechariah 9:

***Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!  
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.***

***I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken.***

***He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.***

***(zech 9:9-10 niv)***

Jesus, by doing what he does here, entering into Jerusalem in this way, sets expectations for the crowd around him. He's saying, watch this. Remember Scripture and look at what I'm doing. And they partly--partly--get it. They get it as much as they can.

### ***Palm Sunday: Jesus Enters***

And then the “triumphal entry,” as tradition calls it, happens, right: Big deal stuff. The two nameless disciples and others give away their cloaks--legally, the only thing that rich people can't take from poor people, and folks don't have closets full of these things, either--and people are throwing down palm fronds, stripping themselves and their neighbors trees, you know? Jesus is in the middle of a big procession. All around him people are cheering and shouting.

They're shouting all sorts of things, these people, excited because they are seeing promises of God coming through before their very eyes. They shout:

“Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father

David! Hosanna in the highest.”

And we read this, and think it sounds nice, pretty, right? We’ve got Hosanna in our praise songs and our hymns. It’s good stuff. But “Hosanna!” is a call, a command, a plea: Save! Deliver! Hosanna means “Deliver us!” “Save Us!” Urgently. Now.

But there’s more than that. This crowd is quoting from a famous Psalm, Psalm 118, a Psalm that gets used all the time in the gospels, because it’s a psalm about God triumphing over Israel’s enemies, meeting Israel’s great need.

And we can forget that Israel was under Roman occupation, led by a Jewish puppet king, and that they weren’t hanging out looking for God to save their souls; they were God’s People, their souls didn’t need saving as far as they were concerned. What they were on the look out for wasn’t a way to get to heaven; they were looking for God to make good on the promise that they’re the occupying forces would be kicked out, and God would reign over Israel.

When they shout “Hosanna!” “Save” they aren’t asking God to save their mortal souls; they are asking Jesus to kick Rome out, and do it fast. It’s because of Psalm 118 that they cut down palm tree boughs and lay them on the ground.

***Palm Sunday: Quoting Psalm 118: 13-29***

Remember the Psalm? We've already read some of it this morning. I'll read a bit, too:

**I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me.**

**The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.**

**Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous:**

**"The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!**

**The LORD's right hand is lifted high;**

**the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!"**

**I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.**

**The LORD has chastened me severely,**

**but he has not given me over to death.**

**Open for me the gates of righteousness;**

**I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.**

**This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.**

**I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.**

**The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;**

**the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.**

**This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

**O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success.**

**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.**

**From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us.**

**With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession**

**up to the horns of the altar.**

**You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.**

**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.**

### ***Palm Sunday: Psalm 118***

The psalm writer is praising God because of the victory God has given him; and he's entering into Jerusalem, entering through the city gates and up to the Temple after an amazing military victory that's described in the Psalm's first part.

And these people quote it: "Hosanna! Lord, save us!" They are the ones with boughs in their hands, laying them on the ground. By singing this song, they are claiming that right now it's coming true! The military champion has arrived! They forget that Jesus chose to act out a passage in which the coming king doesn't overthrow oppressors, but disarms them and comes in

peace.

They are proclaiming that the Messiah is here. He's arrived! Hosanna! He is saving us now! And Jesus marches up through the town, making a scene, really: people are all around him, some of them aren't wearing all their clothes, leafy branches--palm fronds--are being laid in front of him, trampled up by everyone as Jesus moves on--and this whole procession, we can guess, is moving pretty slowly, too, right? We've all seen cartoons; donkeys move slow! And what better a time for God to make good on his promises than right now, at Passover, when we remember how God brought us out of Egypt. He's going to bring us out from under oppression again. It's gonna be awesome.

### ***Palm Sunday: Continuing On***

And Jesus continues on right up to the Temple, right up to the place where you'd expect the Messiah you've been waiting for to go if you're shouting Psalm 118...

And if we reading from Mark, we'd read this:

"Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the twelve."

He looks all around, looks at everything: and we hold our breath, because this is the moment we've been waiting for! What will he do, right? Fire from Heaven?

Romans flicked away like dirt? Storms and voices from the clouds?

No. He looks around, and he leaves, because, as Mark tells us, "it's late." He goes back to the suburbs near Olive Tree Mountain, back the way he came, walking, maybe, on some muddy rags that used to be clothes, denuded trees all around, a silent crowd. He takes his twelve, and they leave, and that's it.

### ***Palm Sunday: A Big Disappointment***

But what a disappointment. What about showing the Romans whose boss? I want to pull Jesus aside, and tell him, fine, you know redirect their energies toward non-overthrowing-oppressors-stuff, but at least, you know, keep the momentum. You've got a good thing here. Public opinion is on your side; the Donkey Union is for you, Cloak Makers Inc. is excited about what's happened. Palm Fronds & Co. have made a big campaign contribution. Don't waste this opportunity Jesus. Whatever it is you've got to do in Bethany, it can wait--you can rest later, rest when you're dead! Don't waste this.

Jesus just leaves, and leaves behind apparently, the donkey, and the crowd, and the Temple litter, and all his momentum. Because it's late? It just doesn't make sense?, does it? It's counter-productive. By any estimation, if Jesus was out to keep his public happy, or out to ensure some success, he really bungled the job by going back to his hotel, so that he could sleep, I

guess.

***Normally:***

Normally, what I'd do in this moment, what I've always done, is invite us to consider what Jesus knew, what he knew to be true about himself, about God, about his disciples, and evil, and life as Israel was living it, occupied by oppressors seen and unseen.

We'd talk about Jesus' depth of trust in God, and the fact that when you know who you are, and you know that God loves you, you simply aren't driven by the expectations of others, but by a deep internal engine peer-pressure can't touch: the Spirit's guidance and God's desires.

***Right Now:***

But right now I want us to think again about these crowds, and all their unmet expectations.

It's been said that unmet expectations crucified Christ. It's their longing, their hope that went unmet, that caused the crowd--one Jesus has healed, taught, and advocated for--to turn on him and demand his death. It's a powerful thing to consider, especially when we ourselves are facing such a season of unmet expectations. They wanted a hero, and Jesus didn't act heroically, he acted faithfully.

We're in a season of unmet expectations. Not only for ourselves, but for every single person around us. And



our reaction may be to call for blood, like this crowd will soon, or it may be to trudge back home, discouraged, covered in the muddy clothes we've reclaimed for ourselves.

It's naive to wish that this crowd had somehow taken solidarity in the experience of being discouraged together, had somehow come to the conclusion, "Well, at least all our expectations are unmet. Let's wait and see what happens and keep trusting God." People just don't do that, you know?

But they could, if they have the power of God alive in them, the way we do this side of the Spirit.

And I guess I want us to realize this morning that we are in this together. We aren't alone together, we're simply together in this society-wide experience, which is as true of us in the Church as it is outside it, that nothing is going the way we thought it would.

I mean, this week is supposed to be one of the most program-filled weeks in our congregational calendar, you know? And now there's nothing. And even though some of us thank God for it, because we're exhausted and can't imagine doing communion, an egg hunt, easter breakfast, and all our family stuff, too...it's still an unmet expectation. But all of us right now are adjusting to a life that we didn't expect: one without school, with work made weird, with patterns of gathering destroyed. We're making accommodations

that we'd never thought we'd make. We're tightening our belts, and widening our creativity, and none of it's normal. It's not normal.

And is there brightness in the middle of this? Yes. Totally. Of course. But, look, all: The end of Palm Sunday is a moment of bleakness, not triumph, and I don't want us to jump to the triumph, because if we do, we don't appreciate the gift of the bleakness.

How can our unmet expectations be a gift? They're a gift in that we believe that all things can be used for our good by God. That is not the same as saying all things are good. If we say that, we're lying to someone, probably ourselves first. But God can do good, make good, out of all circumstances. And our part in that good-making is to ask the simple question: What is the good in this thing? For me, for others? What good can be and is being made of this?

We've got to linger in the way our expectations are unmet right now. We've got to. We are all forced, right now, to fast in some way, to not exercise the power of movement, of privilege, of regularity that we're used to exercising. What good can come of this forced fast?

What goodness are we discovering in our unmet expectations? To discover it, we have to first name our unmet expectations, pass through them, in the same way that Easter won't come unless Palm Sunday happens first.

And maybe it makes sense--at least a little bit--to consider what Jesus knew, because what you believe about, oh, God and others and yourself always does determine how you respond when your expectations go unmet.

In fact, our reaction to our unmet expectations is the evidence of what we believe is true. Our reaction to our unmet expectations is the evidence of what we believe is true. Our reaction to what's happening in our lives right now is the evidence of what we believe about God, ourselves, and those around us.

What are we revealing about what we believe is most true about ourselves, our God, and the people around us?

### **Conclusion:**

So lean into Palm Sunday. Lean into the truth that unmet expectations are a part of being human: To have them is to be alive. How can you name the unmet expectations in our life right now? They are real, true, objective losses. And there are many of them, people. So many.

They need grieved and examined. Because we won't be able to appreciate the good that comes from all the loss we're experiencing unless we can pass through the sorrow of knowing what we've lost.

And if I can help us at all consider our losses, reflect on our unmet expectations, and discover God right alongside us, just let me know. But let's join in a reading together right now...