

March 24, 2024
Mark 11:1-11; 15:16-20

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“A Palm-less Sunday”

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Preparations for Holy Week and Easter were well under way at the Church of the Ascension. Bulletins for all the services had been ordered; the choirs had rehearsed their music for all the worship services; the altar guild met to review all the changes to the paraments and sanctuary throughout the week; and the flowers for Easter Sunday had been ordered from the local florist. As Palm Sunday approached, it seemed like everything was set for another observance of the last week of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, beginning with his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; his Last Supper with his disciples on Maundy Thursday; his death on the Cross on Good Friday; and his glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. But just as everyone in the congregation was about to relax, someone asked a question that sent chills down everyone’s spine: “Where are the palms?” The staff looked all around the building, but no one could find any. The office staff searched through their files, only to discover to their horror that ordering palms had somehow been overlooked. There was a scramble as worship leaders made phone calls to suppliers, who sadly no longer had any palms to offer. Calls were then made to local churches, but they too did not have any palms that they could spare. For the first time in anyone’s memory, it appeared as though this would be the first “palm-less” Palm Sunday in the history of the Church of the Ascension.

The blessing and distribution of palms on the Sunday that bears their name is a beloved, long-standing tradition in most Christian churches. Palms are a reminder of this day when our Lord Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem to the cheers of crowds who cried out “*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!*” (Mark 11:9-10). Even in climates where palms do not naturally grow, palms are distributed to worshipers as a reminder of this day, and often have a special place in the lives of the faithful throughout the year. Some Christians fold their palm fronds into crosses and keep them in their homes; others place the blessed palms on their mantles or above a doorway to see them every day of the year in remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice in Jerusalem. In the Roman Catholic Church, blessed palms are considered *sacramentals*, or “little sacraments”; such blessed objects “*are to be treated reverently and are not to be employed for profane or inappropriate use even*

if they are owned by private persons.” (Code of Canon Law). The palms that are waved as Christians enter worship on Palm Sunday singing “*all glory, laud, and honour to thee, Redeemer King*” will be saved and burned to create the ashes for Ash Wednesday, a reminder that it was through Christ’s death on the Cross that we are redeemed from the powers of sin and death and raised to new life through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Palm Sunday has always been one of my favourite days of the church year; so, when I began preparing for this week’s sermon, I eagerly dove into Mark’s account of the entry of our Lord into the Holy City at the beginning of this Holy Week. But as I was reading the text, I noticed something surprising: there is no mention of palms in Mark’s account of Palm Sunday. Instead, the Evangelist reports that “*many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields*” (11:8). While many have assumed that these “leafy branches” are a reference to palms that grow naturally in that region, there is nothing to indicate that this must be pointing to the use of palm branches. At first, I assumed that this was merely an oversight by this Evangelist; but as I compared other accounts of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, I discovered that neither Matthew nor Luke makes any direct reference to the use of palms on the first Palm Sunday:

- “A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.” – Matthew 21:8.
- “As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.” – Luke 19:36.

It is only in John’s Gospel that we find a direct reference to palms being used as the crowds welcome Jesus into Jerusalem: “*So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel!’*” (John 12:13). The use of palm branches in the Fourth Gospel recalls their significance in both the Feast of Tabernacles and Hanukkah, two major festivals for the Jewish people:

- “On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days.” – Leviticus 23:40.
- “Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place.” – 2 Maccabees 10:7.

Even if three of the four Gospels do not mention palms in their account of what we know as “Palm Sunday,” this day marks an important moment in the life of Jesus and the basis for the message of salvation through his death and resurrection. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the Jerusalem ministry of Jesus toward which the Gospel narrative has been moving since Jesus’ first prediction of his passion at Caesarea Philippi: *“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again”* (8:27). Marks begins his account of this day by reporting that *“when they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives”* (11:1), a place that is mentioned by the prophet Zechariah as a sign of the fulfillment of God’s promises: *“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that half of the Mount shall withdraw northwards, and the other half southwards”* (Zechariah 14:4). As they approach the Holy City, Jesus instructs two of his disciples to *“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.”* (11:2). The finding of the colt incorporates a common folklore technique in which signed identified the desired person or object. The intention of this text seems to be to present another instance of Jesus’ remarkable power and authority. Jesus tells his disciples that *“if anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’”* (11:3). The note that the colt had never been ridden might point to its sacred use in Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, reminiscent of instructions in the Torah on the selection of animals that had never been used for human labour:

- “This is the statute of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish and on which no yoke has been laid.” – Numbers 19:2.

The colt may also be an allusion to the foal on which the messianic king would ride to enter Jerusalem in Zechariah’s prophecy (*“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! 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.”* – Zechariah 9:9). It is also significant that Jesus includes the promise that he will send the colt back to its owner after he uses it; Roman soldiers routinely requisitioned animal and human labour from the populace with no intention of return or remuneration. Jesus’ promise to return the colt distinguishes him from the ruling forces.

When the disciples find this colt, “*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*” (11:5-6). The disciples bring the colt to Jesus “*and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it*” (11:7). As he begins to ride the colt into Jerusalem, “*many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields*” (11:8). Laying their garments on the ground before Jesus recalls the account of King Jehu’s accession to the throne of Judah: “*Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, ‘Jehu is king.’*” (2 Kings 9:13). The crowds that both went ahead and followed Jesus raised their voices in a shout of acclamation and praise that combines elements of pilgrimage psalms for those traveling to the Holy City as they shouted “*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!*” (11:9-10). The people’s shouts echo the cries of Psalm 118:26 (“*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD*”) while their reference to the arrival of “*the coming kingdom of our ancestor David*” recalls Jesus’ announcement at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel that “*the kingdom of God has come near*” (Mark 1:15). Their cries of “Hosanna!” recall the cries of the people of Israel who cried out to the Lord for salvation; “Hosanna” retains its literal meaning as a cry to the Lord to “save now.”

- “Mark depicts an entry which is triumphant only for Jesus’ followers who have not yet understood his destiny as the Son of Man. For Jesus, it is an entry into suffering and death. He enters Jerusalem as a pilgrim, and as more than a pilgrim. He is no less a king than their words suggest, but his kingdom is other and more than they dare to think.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Unlike in Matthew’s account where Jesus enters the Temple to incite the crowds (“*Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves.*” – Matthew 21:12), the only purpose of Jesus’ visit to the Temple appears to be to inspect its precincts: “*Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve*” (11:11). He will return to Jerusalem, where he will begin the series of events that will lead to the culmination of his mission on the Cross at Golgotha and the empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

While there may not be any palms present in Mark’s account of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, there is something else mentioned whose presence is significant: the cloaks that his disciples place on the colt and the cloaks that the

crowds spread on the ground before Jesus. In Jesus' time, a cloak was often the most important possession a person owned; it was used as a covering, to keep a person warm, and even provided a place for a person to sleep. When a person spread their cloak before a king or dignitary, it was as if they were saying, "*we give you all that we have and all that we need.*" A cloak plays a significant role in the story that precedes Mark's account of the Palm Sunday entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the story of the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus in Jericho. Bartimaeus is described as a "*blind beggar [who] was sitting by the roadside*" (10:46). When he hears that Jesus is approaching, Bartimaeus cries out, "*Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!*" While the crowds try to quiet him, Jesus insists that they allow him to come to our Lord: "*Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here.' And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart; get up, for he is calling you.'*" (10:49). When Bartimaeus hears this, "*throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.*" (10:50). Bartimaeus leaves behind what had been his most valuable possession in faith that the one in whose presence he found himself could give him that which was priceless:

- "Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." – 10:51-52.

Not only does Bartimaeus regain his physical sight; he can now see that Jesus is truly the Son of David, the fulfillment of God's promises, and become one of his followers. He is the first of many who will cast aside their cloaks in recognition that Jesus is the one who comes to fulfill God's promises and to provide God's gifts that will far outstrip anything they have left behind.

While the cloaks symbolized the trust both Bartimaeus and the Jerusalem crowds were placing in Jesus, cloaks play another role in Mark's Gospel. After Pontius Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified, Jesus is led by the soldiers into the courtyard of the palace in the presence of the whole cohort, where "*they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, king of the Jews!'*" (15:17-18). In their mockery of Jesus, the soldiers employ a cloak that was a symbol of authority worn by priests, kings, and prophets. While it is the purpose of the soldiers to taunt Jesus as "king" ("*All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads*" – Psalm 22:7), they unknowingly acknowledge by their placing the cloak upon his shoulders that he is truly the one who they mockingly refer to as "king of the Jews," the one whose reign will be celebrated long after the kings they serve have been defeated:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 11:15).

- “More than merely a good man, a noble example, or an innocent sufferer, Jesus before Pilate is the representative in our midst of the authority of God. Consequently, this text speaks not only of the kingliness of Jesus but of the lowliness of God. In Jesus, God identifies with the unjustly accused and the wretched of the earth. Jesus exercises power through weakness and authority through love, thereby revealing in revolutionary terms the way the ultimate Power of the universe works.” – Williamson.

When that “palm-less” Palm Sunday arrived at the Church of the Ascension, worshipers were at first surprised and disappointed that no palms were available. But when the Palm Sunday Gospel was read, something unexpected happened: people began to get up from their seats and spread their coats in the aisle, as if they were also spreading their cloaks before the Lord. The congregation would never again fail to have palms available on this holy day, but from then on people realized that it was not the presence of physical palms that give this day its significance; it is our placing all of our trust in the one who “comes in the name of the Lord” that is at the heart of this day when we begin our journey with Jesus throughout this Holy Week that will lead us to the *“wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died ... [whose] love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”*

Amen.