

“Six Ways to Look at a Parade” or “The Wisdom of Palm Sunday”  
April 2, 2023

John 12:12-16

Let us be honest.

Our hearts are heavy this morning.

Our souls are weary this morning.

At the beginning of Lent, I told you that wisdom has been called the ability to live optimally in a world that is confusing and never completely understandable. This world is confusing at best and our understanding is indeed limited.

The account of Palm Sunday in the Gospel of John ends by telling us that the disciples of Jesus did not understand what was going on at the time. That should come as no surprise. We rarely—if ever—understand the full meaning of events as we experience them.

So, we look at our lives from time to time, seeking not only to remember but also to better understand how we have come to be the individuals we are, that we might see the way ahead more clearly.

In the same way, we remember the events in the life and ministry of Jesus, to better understand what was going on and how those events continue to shape our lives today, that we might see the way ahead more clearly.

Let me suggest, then, six ways that we might look at Palm Sunday.

We can look at Palm Sunday, as we often do, as an occasion of joy, as almost a “dress rehearsal” for the joy of Easter. We delight as the children process through the sanctuary. We even dare to show a little enthusiasm ourselves, furtively waving a palm branch, hoping no one thinks we’re overdoing it.

We watch as Jesus and his followers approach the capital city. It is a time of festival and many of the people there for the celebration go out to meet him. They cut branches from the palm trees. They cry out “Hosanna!” Originally that meant something like “save us.” By the time Jesus came to Jerusalem “Hosanna!” was simply a shout of joy—which suggests that the human cry for help will indeed be met by God’s mercy and compassion; which suggests that when *we* cry out in despair, we may ultimately find ourselves walking on the paths of joy.

One person looked at this moment and said: “Here is a special occasion, exuberance without prudence. Here is celebration. Before the Passion comes jubilation. And in a way it is only for those that are that taken with Jesus that the Passion makes sense.”

When we can recognize our brokenness and cry out: “Hosanna!” we see a day of joy.

But look again: Peter Gomes once said that the palms we wave today are a symbol “of the vanity of human foolishness, the illusion of what passes for victory in this world.” Sounding much like what we have often heard from Ecclesiastes this Lent, he added: “The branches of palm...ought to remind us of both vanity and modesty: the vanity of what we think we can do and the modesty of what we actually can do, or of what we don’t do,” concluding, “These are signs of suffering, the suffering of the Savior, the suffering of his people, the suffering of all creation and of us with it.”

We wave palms as signs of suffering this morning, knowing how little we have done to curb gun violence, how far away we are from the equality we seek, how we continue to endanger our planet.

We can look at this day and see the coming disaster, the approaching failure, as well as the vanity and emptiness of the present time.

I promised you six ways of looking at Palm Sunday and we now come to the third: This is a day that shows us something about ourselves. And it shows us something about ourselves by showing us something about Jesus.

I once saw a movie poster that showed a picture of Jesus. It read: “The real Jesus was different. He was human.”

The real Jesus was human. Look at him and you will see one human being pursuing his course with resolute determination.

It could have been different. Jesus could have stayed in relative obscurity and complete safety. He could have quit—at any time. What did Judas sing? “Nazareth, your favorite son, should have stayed a great unknown...He’d have done nobody hard, caused no alarm.”

Instead, he made the difficult decision to live out his calling to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to proclaim the year of God’s favor.

When we look at how Jesus lived, we are able to enlarge our own ideas of both living and dying.

Jesus took up the conflicts of life; he pursued the journey of life. Jesus embraced death just as he embraced whatever life brought him—his joys and his sorrows, his conflicts and his confrontations—and he did this for the sake of his message and his way of living.

When we look at the Jesus who enters Jerusalem to the acclaim of the multitude after three years of teaching and healing, in the midst of increasing conflict and threat, what we see is commitment. And we see how we might live as well. We see that we cannot cheat death, but that we, too, might live out of a faith that dares to act with no iron-clad assurance of success.

We can also look at this day as a day that shows us something about God. And, here too, it shows us something about God by showing us something about Jesus.

The crowd gathers palm branches and goes out to meet Jesus. Some look forward to the arrival of a leader who would triumph over the Romans who occupied their land. So, they shout: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the *King* of Israel!”

It is only at this point, in order to clarify what it means to call *him* a king, that Jesus finds a donkey and rides, not as a conquering warrior, but humbly. The One they greet reveals strength in weakness, greatness in humility, conquest in vulnerability.

Jesus does come to us humbly. Jesus comes gently, in a way that we would not expect. In doing so he calls into question all of our ideas about God.

Some find it easy to imagine a God whose love is limited, who accepts some and rejects others;

or a God who will force us to act in certain ways with the threat of punishment;

or a God who is so devoid of power as to make no difference in our lives.

But in Jesus we see God in a different way.

The God who is revealed to us in Jesus is the One who knows our weakness; the One who responds to human pain; the One who takes on human suffering, bearing it fully on the cross. This is to say, the God revealed to us in Jesus is Love.

Love releases a tremendous amount of energy. Everything that was being used for resentment, for anger, hatred, or self-loathing is now available for something more positive. This world is not left to itself. The God who is Love is constantly bringing new life, new energy into our world and into our lives.

Look at Palm Sunday.

We can look at it as an occasion of joy.

We can look at it as an occasion of despair and death.

We look at it and see something about ourselves.

We can look at it and see something about God.

We can look at Palm Sunday and see an occasion of great giving.

It wasn't obvious at first, of course. The disciples didn't understand. After the crucifixion, after the resurrection they began to remember.

Paul, writing decades after Palm Sunday and Good Friday and Easter, still struggled to understand the meaning of those events. Looking back, however, he remembered an early Christian hymn in which people sang:

Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God  
did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself.  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And...humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death,  
 even death on a cross.

This is the way that God gives. Pouring out everything. Holding nothing back. Always lavishing upon us and all creation the love and compassion, the mercy and forgiveness that we always seek. Look! It is given freely that we might receive freely.

Joy and despair, the knowledge of ourselves and the knowledge of God, great generosity—the wisdom that we have found in Ecclesiastes in recent weeks is shown and embodied in this day.

There is yet one more way to look at this day, this parade.

Here we see how to live when everything seems to be spinning out of control.

The danger is this: we can fall into the deception that is despair. We can think that we lack power, the ability to act. We can feel that events are beyond our control.

But look. As the authorities plan to kill him, Jesus continues to hope, to act, to take control. As John tells the story, Jesus himself finds the donkey that he will ride. Earlier he had told those who would listen: “No one *takes* my life from me, I lay it down of my own accord.” John tells us as well that later in the week, Jesus carried the cross by himself.

The twentieth century African-American theologian, mystic, and prophet, Howard Thurman, both encourages and challenges us, saying: “There is no need to *fear* evil. There is *every* need to understand what it does, how it operates in the world, what it draws upon to sustain itself. We must not shrink from the knowledge of the evilness of evil.”

He adds: “Over and over we must know that the real target of evil is not destruction of the body, the reduction to rubble of cities; the real target of evil is to corrupt the human spirit... Therefore, the evil in the world around us must not be allowed to move from without to within. This would be to be overcome by evil.”

In the face of all that would cut down and destroy us, we see in the events of Palm Sunday the way forward. We overcome evil as we take control of our lives, our *selves*, our own futures as we continue to follow the One who was best able to do this.

We rarely—if ever—understand the full meaning of events as we experience them. But we look again, we look in different ways and find the wisdom of Palm Sunday.

Even now, especially now, that wisdom, Thurman reminds, us is that “Birds still sing; the stars continue to cast their gentle gleam over the desolation of the battlefields, and the heart is still inspired by the kind word and the gracious deed. To drink in the beauty that is within reach, to clothe one’s life with simple deeds of kindness, to keep alive a sensitiveness to the movement of

the spirit of God in the quietness of the human heart and in the workings of the human mind—this is as always, the ultimate answer...”

Let us continue to be those who answer in this way.