

Palm Sunday
Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 26:36-27:54
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This morning we compress into an hour-long worship service dramatic events from Jesus' last week of earthly life. Perhaps this Sunday before Easter should be solely devoted to what is called Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As we heard outside, from the 21st chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus allowed himself a brief moment of exaltation. He rode into the capital city on a donkey fulfilling Jewish expectations of the arrival of a much-needed and much-anticipated Jewish king. The people who witnessed it were ecstatic waving and scattering branches as well as their valuable garments before him – a pre-Oscar red carpet affair. Shouts of Hosanna meant messianic royalty was present in Jesus of Nazareth.

Why not just let that celebration be ours as well on this day we call Palm Sunday? Why not go straight from happy parade Sunday to happier resurrection Sunday?

The church, in her wisdom, knew that people don't generally like mid-week services, especially ones where bad human behavior is spotlighted. The final events culminating in Jesus' crucifixion are also included today in the passion reading so we won't avoid the all too human betrayals, denials, injustices and cruelties of Good Friday.

There can't be a glorious resurrection without a more courageous death. We can't find our way to life and peace without walking in the way of the cross, or more simply put, "no pain, no gain."

In that week between the victor's procession and the convict's trudge to Golgotha, Jesus will cause havoc in the Temple by tipping over money changers' tables. He protests profiteering in his Father's house of prayer. He teaches extensively highlighting the way of humble service above lording over others. Again and again, he contests with the most powerful and learned of the Jewish authorities. And he warns of turbulent and chaotic days that lie ahead, a reference to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.

On his last night with his disciples, Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with a twist by assigning special value to bread and wine as a means of forever remembering him. After that last supper, one of his twelve turned betrayer, Judas, leaves to seal Jesus' grizzly fate.

In the garden, where Jesus leads his band to pray, the disciples sleep. They can't begin to comprehend the agony Jesus is contemplating – so unimaginable, in fact, that Jesus requests a Plan B – “Let this cup pass from me.”

In the end, however, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

Arrest leads to a kangaroo court, which quickly dispatches a guilty verdict and an armed transport to the highest earthly power around – Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate comes across sympathetic, but this depiction doesn't square with all the other sources which portray him as a ruthless despot. It is very unlikely he would spare any man's life who threatened the peace of Jerusalem in the least, but here and elsewhere in the gospels, a notorious criminal named Jesus Barabbas is released.

The Jewish name Barabbas means “son of a father.” It's no coincidence that Jesus, son of a human father, is freed, whereas Jesus, Son of The Father in Heaven, is condemned. Barabbas is the first of many sinners to be spared by Jesus' death.

So what are we to make of this familiar, yet tragic and at the same time life-altering story? How should we respond to it? Most simply, we can feel and express a heartfelt affection for Jesus born of gratitude for his life of conviction, courage and tenacious loyalty to us willful human beings. And we can try every day to live more noble and upright lives ourselves with a determination to exhibit the power of love rather than the power of control.

All of this may be best summed up in a song we'll sing today after communion.

“My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine, for thee all the follies of sin I resign; my gracious Redeemer, my Savior art thou; if ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.” AMEN.