

## **"PALM SUNDAY: BEING THERE"**

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

March 28, 2021

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Imagine you are there among the people waiting expectantly along the roadside, palms in hand. You feel the anticipation in the air. You know it's a combination of crowd energy, and a desire for a hero, and the pent-up frustration of a people who've felt oppressed too long. Palms are already beginning to wave as you stand on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of you. Is he here yet?

You've heard that Jesus would be coming into Jerusalem today, and you are eager to see him. Maybe all you know about him is what you've heard: crazy rumors about a new kingdom to end the oppressive rule of Rome, and that he might even be the long-promised Savior the prophets spoke of. But they also say that he heals people, cares about folks nobody else pays attention to, speaks words that seem to come from God. No wonder you want to see him, hear this, for yourself.

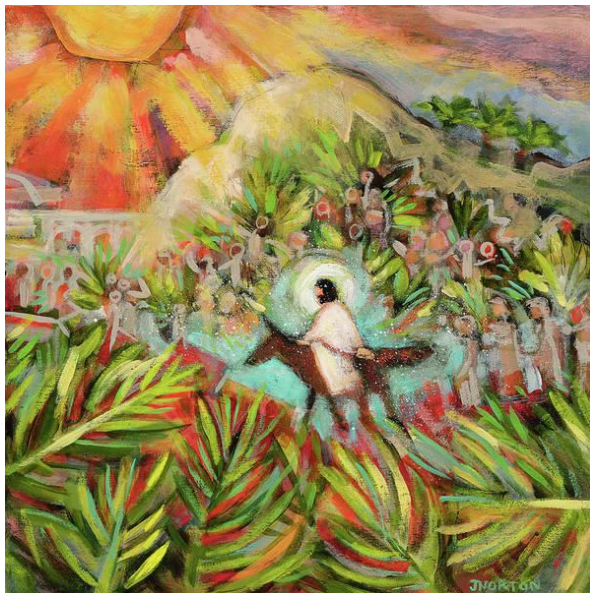
Or maybe you have seen him before, listened to him talk ... and his words have stayed with you. There was something about him, and you just had to see him again, try to understand who is he and what this is all leading to.

You sense a buzz of excitement; people are moving forward. You can see that he's coming now. He's riding on a donkey – an odd choice for a supposed king, but you know enough to realize what the donkey means: Jesus, if he means to be a king, means to be a different kind of king. A humble king; the people's king; a king dedicated to peace, not coercion. No wonder he has such appeal. Palm branches are waving all around you now; people are shouting. The crowd's energy is infectious and you wave your palm branch too, a little bit at first, then, when he comes close enough for you to see his face, you can't help joining in the shouts of "hosanna."

Palm Sunday is a day you want to "be there." We can hear or read other stories of Jesus and consider more objectively what they mean and why they are told, but on Palm Sunday, we want to be participants, not observers. We want to be among the crowd, waving our palms and shouting "hosanna."

That's why I like this picture.

"Palm Sunday" by Jen Norton >



It's most definitely from the point of view of someone in the crowd, trying to see over the heads and through the waving palm fronds, to get just a glimpse of Jesus on the donkey as he makes his way along the road, into Jerusalem, toward ... whatever it is that comes next. The picture captures the energy, the celebratory atmosphere of the day. You can almost feel the warmth of the sun and the movement of the waving palms and the thrill of seeing Jesus riding by. This picture puts us there.

It's often pointed out that the crowd we join on Palm Sunday will lose their enthusiasm for Jesus pretty quickly when things start to get dangerous.

Their adoration was fickle.

Their attachment to him was shallow.

Their understanding of him was small.

Their interest in his message was short-lived.

When it became clear that the Roman authorities and the co-opted religious establishment would act swiftly and use any means to put an end to the spread of ideas they deemed upsetting to their hold on power, everything changed. Associating with Jesus suddenly seemed riskier than many folks had bargained for. No doubt some were disappointed that the revolution they'd hoped for didn't materialize. Probably a lot of people just went with the flow of ever-changing popular opinions.

By Friday, there will be no sign of this day's welcome parade except perhaps some palm branches lying trampled where they were dropped along the dusty road.

Is it true, as we often assume, that these very same people who waved their palm branches with such fervor, spread out cloaks like a red carpet, and shouted "hosanna" were, in just a few days, yelling "crucify him" with angry fists in the air?

It's likely that some were; maybe many. Some most likely just walked away in fear or disillusionment. Certainly few of them followed Jesus to support him.

Interestingly, we are not quite so eager to be *there*, among that Friday crowd. We'd rather believe we would not have been. But if we want to be at Palm Sunday, we had better acknowledge that we could as easily be in the angry, accusing Friday crowd, too.

Today, however, I want to take us, not ahead to Friday, but beyond that. I want us to remember that although many of the folks in that Palm Sunday crowd lost their courage, didn't understand who Jesus was (or forgot what they knew of him), turned on him, or deserted him... some of them eventually came back. And the church was born.

Their eyes were opened to who he was and what he was about. They witnessed his undying love. They experienced the joy and power of his resurrection. They remembered his words, and this time they heard them in their hearts. They realized that the praise and acknowledgement they participated in on Palm Sunday held more truth than they knew at the time.

Eventually, some of these folks whose Palm Sunday enthusiasm for Jesus might have seemed shallow, overly-emotional, and temporary, did, in some way, take up their palms again with a deeper and more faithful praise. They said "hosanna" again, and meant it.

You know, we think of "hosanna" as a word of praise and adoration. But let's focus for a minute on its actual meaning: "hosanna" means "save us."

It has in it a certain kind of acknowledgement – maybe including praise – of the God-infused power people associated with Jesus. It implies a belief – or at least a hope – that Jesus might in fact have the power to save.

But it also holds the understanding that they *need* saving. But from what?

A lot of them would probably have said from Roman rule, or at least from the relentless system of political and economic repression they'd known so long. From a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, perhaps. From religion that seemed out of touch. From all the things that threw up barriers between people. From guilt and fear. From the pursuit of things that couldn't make them happy. From the impossibility of saving themselves.

I suspect those folks had as many different ways of understanding their need to be "saved" as we do.

But I want us to remember that they were shouting "save us," even when they weren't quite aware of where the story was going. They knew that all was not well in their lives and in their world, even as they participated in the Palm Sunday procession, this demonstration of praise and hope, this shaky and short-lived attempt to welcome Jesus.

All is not well in our lives and our world. We are perhaps not much more prepared to really welcome Jesus with our whole hearts, to praise him sincerely, to commit ourselves to following him faithfully – wherever and to whatever that leads.

We sing "hosanna" today, and wave our palms. And like some of that other crowd, we'll still lose our courage from time to time, go astray, go into hiding, think maybe our trust in Jesus was misplaced and look for someone or something else, betray and deny him, hurt and disappoint him. We are capable of wondrous praise, but we are also capable of violence, disloyalty, betrayal, apathy. Sometimes where we are it's Palm Sunday, and Jesus is there, coming toward us in the name of the Lord. Sometimes it's Friday, though, and, thanks be to God, Jesus is there too, for all of us - those of us who lose our courage and drift away, and even for those who turn on him. We keep saying "hosanna," save us. And our plea for help turns into praise, and we come back and pick up our palms again – or whatever we have to offer – and we are glad we can show up to welcome Jesus and be part of the story.