

**This Is the Day**

Palm Sunday/Communion

April 2, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11

<sup>1</sup> When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup> “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” <sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

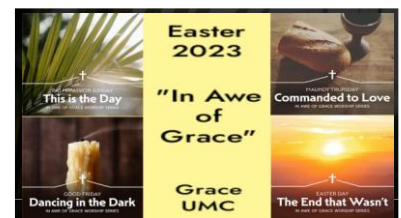
<sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” <sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”



Welcome to Palm Sunday! Welcome to Passion Sunday! We begin Holy Week with a celebration and with a recognition of the hard days that lie ahead. As we look out over the week

ahead, we first recognize that Easter Sunday is God’s Day.

The event is God’s event, and we simply receive the resurrection as the gift that it is. Good Friday is the day when sin in all its fullness and ugliness is exposed.



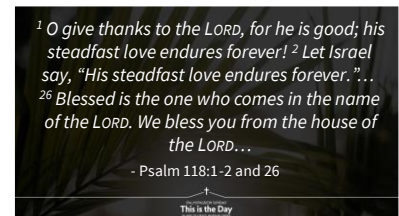
And it is the day when agape love – Jesus’ unconditional love for you and me – is revealed in its fullness and glory. Maundy Thursday is Jesus’ day. He tries one last time to teach by example and by word what it means to follow him. And today, today is our day. It is the day that Jesus declares who and what he is. It is the day that Jesus claims the crown and throne that has been his since the beginning of creation. My friends, *“This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* Let us pray...



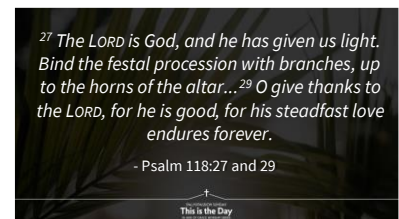
Turn with me to Psalm 118 as we begin this time together.

These words set the stage for what is to come. I'll be reading verses 1 and 2, 26 and 27, and 29.

*<sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! <sup>2</sup> Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”... <sup>26</sup> Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.*



*<sup>27</sup> The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar... <sup>29</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*



This Psalm comes from what is known as the “Egyptian Hallel” – a collection of 6 songs that were used in the celebration of the Passover meal. Psalms 113 and 114 were recited or sung before the meal; Psalms 115-118 afterward. Jesus and about a million other Jews were converging on Jerusalem to celebrate this holy meal. All of these Psalms would be fresh on their hearts and minds as they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

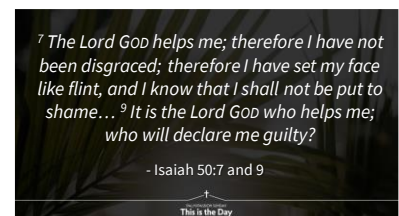
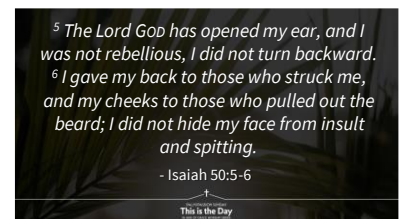
Psalm 118 expresses thanksgiving for the Lord's goodness and encourages trust in God's faithful love. Verse 26 would have been one of several phrases shouted during the triumphal entry: *"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD."* Jesus himself will quote this verse as he weeps over Jerusalem later in the week. Psalm 118 draws to a close in prayer and thanksgiving, looking forward to an even greater revelation of God's victory and rescue. As the Passover meal was celebrated later in the week, these words, this offering of prayer and thanksgiving, these words would be sung. How they would ring true for those first Christians on Easter morning as they realized Jesus' victory over the grave and the power now available to rescue them from their sin!



Of course, Jesus knew the rest of the story so he would be connecting these dots as he rode along the parade route, entering Jerusalem and working his way up to the temple.

Jesus would connect to other words found in scripture too. We recall that in the wilderness, when tempted by Satan, Jesus drew on the word of God as his source of strength. In our Old Testament reading for this week, we hear Isaiah's words of prophecy concerning what was soon to come for Jesus the Messiah. Turn with me to Isaiah 50 as we read these words that must have encouraged Jesus as he fulfilled the purpose for which he came to dwell in the flesh. I'll be reading verses 5-7 and 9:

*<sup>5</sup> The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. <sup>6</sup> I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. <sup>7</sup> The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;*



*therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame...<sup>9</sup> It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?*

These are some of the words that empowered Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, humble and yet mighty. He knew the sovereign God was with him. Moving forward through the week, these words will become what Jesus lives out. At this point he has “*set his face like flint*” as he moves through the city. In the physical sense, Jesus will have his beard pulled out, he will endure mockery and spitting, he will be beaten and disgraced and put to shame. Yet within himself, he calmly and assuredly awaits the vindication that he knows will come from God. With God in his corner, Jesus is determined to do God’s will as the week unfolds.

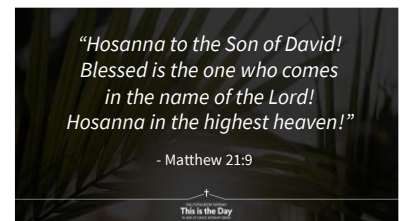


Turning to Matthew 21, let us enter the palm parade scene and let us consider the audience along the parade route. And make no mistake, my friends, we are in the audience. It is

hard to fathom this, yet it is the reality of Holy Week. It does not feel right that “Hosanna” is shouted aloud on this day and then, later in the week, shouts of “Crucify” ring out with equal passion. But this is reflective of the condition of our souls, isn’t it? Yes, on some days we would stand right there with the palm-waving crowd, shouting out our Hosannas. And on other days, on our darker days, we shout “crucify” as we shake our fists at God with our sinful behaviors, with our un-Christlike words and thoughts. While we must admit this truth about ourselves, what of the crowd that gathered that day as Jesus entered in triumph?

As we turn to verses 1-6, we see that this was an orchestrated event. Jesus sends two disciples ahead and they find the donkey and colt just as Jesus foretold. *“The Lord needs them”* was all that had to be spoken to secure the donkey and colt. A large crowd gathers along the route as the disciples put their cloaks on the beasts as Jesus rides into town.

In verse 8 we read that *“a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road,”* creating a royal entry for Jesus. The crowd that goes before and that followed after shouted, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”* We have to ask two questions as we consider the audience. First, who made up this large crowd? And second, did they get it?



Reading Matthew’s gospel, we can see that he gets it. That is why he quotes from Zechariah in verse 5: *“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* Matthew wants to make sure that we get what he got. But we need to remember that he wrote his gospel many years after the fact. So, on the day, did the crowd get it? To begin to answer that question, let us turn to the first question: Who made up this large crowd? The original participants were certainly the twelve disciples and Jesus’ other regular followers, those who had ventured with him from Jericho. In Matthew 20:29, as he leaves Jericho, we read, *“a large crowd followed him.”* At the end of chapter 20, two blind men are healed along the route, and they too join the crowd.

Others coming for the Passover celebration probably were melded into the crowd as well as some folks coming and going from the city. And still others probably came from inside Jerusalem. It is believed that people who knew Jesus from his ministry in Galilee and Judea came out to welcome him as well as some who had been present in the large group of Jews that had come to mourn with Mary and Martha, where they witnessed Lazarus' resurrection and came to believe in Jesus. Suffice it to say that this was the largest crowd ever gathered during Jesus' ministry.

Some in the crowd – those that knew Jesus and those that traveled here with him – they got it. They understood that this was “*the king... coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.*” To these, this was a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy. This was the occasion to shout, “*Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!*” But, no doubt, there were many in the crowd who said to one another, “Why are we doing this again?” And still others who identified the focal point as Jesus from Galilee, who would share this with their neighbor who, in turn, would said, “Oh, right” all the while having no clue who this Jesus guy was. So to answer the “Did they get it?” question, yes and no would be the answer. Clearly some understood the triumphal entry for what it was, and many others were just along for the ride, so to speak.

Viewed from God's perspective, the triumphal entry was the victorious entry of the king of kings into the holy city of Jerusalem. But the parade does not end at the Golden Gate on the eastern edge of the old city. It winds and climbs its way up to the nearby temple. This too is part of the story today and for the week ahead.

Continuing on in Matthew 21, starting in verse 12, we read the rest of the story. Verses 12-17 are also part of this day that the Lord had made. Hear now the rest of the story:



*<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”*

This outburst from Jesus was a surprise to everyone except Jesus. It was quite the turnaround from the king coming, humble and riding on a donkey, the symbol of peace. Maybe the violence that shocked almost everyone was just what the zealots and others were still looking for in this Messiah. But even to these, why attack the religious leaders and the economic system that supports the Jewish temple? These zealots might ask: Jesus Messiah, if you are going to strike a blow, why not strike the Romans, the oppressors? That would have made sense. But there was definitely purpose in this outburst. Jesus struck at the machinery that would have to strike back, that would have to be a part of orchestrating his crucifixion.

Continuing on, we read verses 14-17:

*<sup>14</sup> The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. <sup>15</sup> But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry <sup>16</sup> and said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?”*



*Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself’?”<sup>17</sup> He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.*



The passage ends with the Jesus the disciples had known all along – with the healer and the teacher caring for the blind and lame, with the common folk becoming excited about this

Jesus. The children shouted *“Hosanna to the Son of David”* throughout the temple courts. The champion of the people was once again ministering to those that he came to save. But the spark had been set. The religious leaders were angry; they had been challenged. Conflict and challenge would escalate quickly over the next few days. Soon these religious leaders would begin to plot Jesus’ death. The murmurs of “crucify” were already being heard whispered in the halls of power. In this sense too this is the day that the Lord had made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow.* Palm or Passion Sunday? What are you more drawn to today? How would spending time in the other lead to faith growth?
- 2) *Pray.* The Spirit continues to turn over the tables of our hearts. What tables are you trying to hold down? Pray for the strength to surrender this to God.
- 3) *Study.* Read John 12:44-50. This passage leads us into our Maundy Thursday text. How would you interpret and apply verse 50: *“And I know that his commandment is eternal life”* (NRSV)?