

Palm Sunday 2020
Matthew 21:1-11 and Philippians 2:5-11
April 5, 2020
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If there is one word to describe the events surrounding Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem by way of a palm procession it is ironic. Ironic. The appearance of a joyous acclamation of welcome to a Galilean prophet hides the reality that the Son of God is igniting the events leading up to his death. We, followers of a crucified Lord, know the contradictions of the story: the sacred combination of praise and longing, of welcoming a Jesus we love and aim to follow while never fully understanding the cost of the journey. Matthew himself inserts the irony. The joyous crowd's loud Hosannas agitate a city, stirring the turmoil. "Who is this one?" the city's inhabitants ask.

It is also ironic that on today, one of the few days in the Christian calendar where the church moves out of its pews and into processions, we are bound inside our homes. Today is the day for palm waving, sidewalk processions, loud Hosannas – and here we are, making due with backyard branches, virtual worship, and waving to neighbors from the proper distance. And just as Jesus' procession only hinted toward deeper realities, our status as home-bound doesn't fully capture the depths of our experience over the past few days: the trauma of a global disease, the grief of lives lost, the upheaval of everyone's daily routines. Mixed in with the upheaval, trauma and grief might well be our gratitude for loved ones and emergency responders, a heightened sense of our interdependence. Friends, families, and neighbors are suddenly dearer to us. It is hard to capture the totality of today. Life is never one thing. Following Jesus is not either.

So the lesson Palm Sunday can offer us is to embrace the paradox, the paradox of praise and rejection experienced by Jesus, and lies at the heart of this ironic – and iconic – scene. To you, Jesus, we sing our loud hosannas. As we, like the beloved hymn, present to you our prayers, and praise and anthems, we name the reality that our discipleship does not stretch deep enough. Whatever our longings to be not only in the crowd that sings but in the disciples whose friendship surrounds you, that longing lies next to our weak resolve, our capacity to be distracted, our sadness at knowing our failures to fully follow you to the cross.

Next to the irony lives the beauty of this moment; there lives the goodness of God. Jesus enters the holy city of Jerusalem - a city that bears God's history - having already predicted his death. His death will be the place of God's greatest work of love. We can embrace the paradoxes within ourselves, confident that Jesus embraces us, putting God's great work of love to work in our lives.

Have you found this week that at some points, the news of the day is more than you can take? You've read enough about shortage of supplies, lives lost, exhausted workers, rising unemployment? Have you looked away thinking, I need a break from

the unrelenting news? God's faithfulness emerges in the One who enters a holy city, which will be the place of his death and he doesn't look away. He names it all, embraces it all, knowing the cost it will be for his life. Buried within those glad hosannas lives a deeper, more lasting note. Listen for the deep notes today, and know this is the solemn foundation upon which life will be built anew.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. This earliest formulation of a church hymn proclaimed the Jesus who embraces paradox. We sing the contradiction of passion and glory, humility and exaltation, death and Resurrection. Though he was God, Jesus became human. Not only human but a lowly servant, and in his humility God raised him to his highest glory. The key word here is self-emptying. Jesus embraces us by emptying himself. The self-emptying Jesus becomes our ever-living, ever-present Lord.

Surely we can recognize something of Jesus's self-emptying during these days. We, too, have been stripped of those things that offered us security or structure. We have been forced to give up so many of the things that pre-occupy us in modern day life: commutes, long working days, constant shopping, spring trips, endless busyness. And so as we sit today, at home, on Palm Sunday, with whatever elements we have – simply branches or paper palms, grateful for gifts of our lives, mindful of the sacrifices of others - may we see the strength of Christ who enters every city and sense the enormity of God's actions. May our hearts make a procession of love toward him, so that as Jesus enters, everything in us that is selfish, false, or unwilling to change, may be stirred up, making us so wholly ready for his Resurrection to come.

Today is ironic, yes. But now let whatever is false in us fade away to expose the eternal truths of God's love. Let the reality of what Jesus is doing emerge. Hosanna to our king. May your saving love hold us today, and all days.