



A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
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Palm Sunday

2 April, 2023

I come to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Palm Sunday is one of the great Sundays of the church year. The rush of excitement as we go through the ritual of procession with the repetition of Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna! And then the opening strains of *All glory laud and honor* do me in, every time. Every year when I look around and see the church family and think about the centuries of sacred experience that we enter into during this Holy Week I know I am not alone. What we are doing here today isn't a re-enactment, or nostalgic reverie about an event that is past. We are entering anew into God's eternal goodness which we humans best understand through story, song, and the drama of liturgy.

Christ's victory over death and the grave is a total upending of evil and makes the most sense to us when we allow it to come off the page and into our lives this week. You could say that today is the overture of the week to come. Hearing the themes of trial and triumph as we do today, ending in silent adoration for him who bares our every grief, as awesome as this is, cannot contain or work out to its conclusion every theme and motif of this Holy Week.

Egeria, a nun well known to us from her 4th century travel log writes this about Palm Sunday: As the eleventh hour draws near ... all the children who are gathered at the top of the Mount of Olives, including those who are not yet able to walk because they are too young and therefore are carried on their parents' shoulders, all of them bear branches, some carrying palms, others, olive branches. And the bishop is led in the same manner as the Lord once was led.... From the top of the mountain as far as the city and from there through the entire city ... everyone accompanies the bishop the whole way on foot, and this includes distinguished ladies and men of consequence.

Everyone, from babies to distinguished ladies and men of consequence process together in a scene of holy playfulness. I think it is safe to say that from the first days of the church children have been handed palm branch and turned them into light sabers. I am here for that and I want to tell you why.

In a recent article titled *This Palm Sunday Ponder Donkeys not Branches*, Esau Mccauley wrote that the Gospels make clear that Jesus' choice of a donkey for his entrance into Jerusalem was purposeful. The people chose the palm branch, the symbol of military victory and Jesus chose a donkey, "a symbol that emphasized humility and lowliness instead of military strength." Now, the people were not wrong to choose the palm branch, they were trying to make sense of Jesus' impact on their world. As Jesus entered into Jerusalem Pilate also entered. Pilate on a war horse, Pilate also receiving the accolades of his people waving palm branches as one did in the Ancient Near East for military victors returned from their campaign.

The people are caught between two Kingdoms, The Kingdom of military power and its attendant culture of fear and scarcity, and the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Goodness and Mercy. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry he proclaimed to the people, "repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near." And in his entry into Jerusalem the Kingdom of Heaven has come. Jesus riding in on the donkey's back has come home from his own successful campaign having won victory after victory over disease and death. Rather than laying the people low he has raised them up. Men and women, the in crowd and the out crowd alike have been made clean and given equal stature. No longer are we to see ourselves in terms of them against us, but as brother and sister, friend.



The people are caught up in their love of Jesus even though they can not understand just yet what that means. They, like us, will need to make a choice. Dual citizenship is not an option. When Fr. Drew and I planned out our Lenten series of Truth, Beauty, Goodness, Mercy and Gift and which quality of Jesus should go on which Sunday I do not recall us consciously chosen goodness for today. I had not, anyway, I had thought that each of these qualities would work pretty well for most of our readings the last 5 weeks.

However it came about, ending with the Goodness of Jesus really works because his entry into Jerusalem surrounded by God's people reminds me of God walking through the garden of creation and seeing the goodness of all that God had made. The goodness of Jesus is the goodness of God. And the world so beloved by God reflects back to God the goodness which God intended for us. When Jesus looked at the broken he saw their inherent goodness and uncovered it for others to see too, and told them go forth and sin no more. He healed them, but then left them to decide what they would do with their second chance.

Jesus leaves us with a choice too; are we going to repent and turn our backs on that which destroys us? Our greed, our self serving ways? Will we choose to turn our face towards what is good, or not? For whom do we wave our palm branches? How are we going to workout the conflicts in our lives? The conflicts of work and family, our competing priorities, different for each of us, complicated for all of us. It is God's will we want to see worked out in our lives, our alignment to it is the hardest part.

But, through the wisdom of the church we are given an entire week every year to consider the depth of God's love for the world and the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Now, back to kids and their palm branch light sabers. It is a little bit like beating weapons into plough shares, is it not? See how they throw themselves into the goodness of holy imaginative work and Godly play and let that be our model. Enter in to the drama of Holy Week. Rattle your palms in procession today and follow Jesus, stay close at hand as darkness settles in this week so that when the Son rises next Sunday you feel the fullness of God's redeeming goodness and mercy.