

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This year again we have decided to focus today on Palm Sunday and to save the reading of the Passion for Good Friday. What that allows us to do is to linger a little at the gates of Jerusalem, to enjoy the spectacle of Jesus on the donkey and the crowds with their hosannas and branches and cloaks on the ground. Jesus has grabbed his moment. He is surging in the polls. The crowds are on his side, so much so that the religious authorities that are out to get him are afraid to act. Jesus for a time has free reign to criticize those authorities for their abuses, for their injustice, and for their unfaithfulness. That's what comes next in this chapter, the cleansing of the temple and then the cursing of the fig tree in a dramatic prophetic condemnation of the religious leadership. And for the moment, Jesus' opponents just have to take this criticism. The crowd is on Jesus' side. It's very satisfying. Moments like these are a staple of the movies, when at the end the little guy finally dresses down the villain, gives him a piece of his mind and there's nothing the villain can do. It's everyone's fantasy. You know, what you *would* have said to your overbearing boss if it wouldn't cost you your job, what you *should* have said to someone's insult but didn't think of until later.

But this isn't the end of the story, as we know. And Jesus isn't here in Jerusalem for revenge. He is here to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven – God's kingdom, God's administration, if you will. That is what the donkey is about. Jesus doesn't come as a conquering hero, riding on a chariot at the head of an army. That's what happens on the other side of town, where the Roman legions ride in in military formation. Jesus offers a contrasting vision to the Romans' intimidating display. He comes in peace on a donkey. A minivan, not a Humvee. And those who follow him are the same crowds that he has been attending to since early in Matthew's gospel: the common folk, the poor, the sick and injured, the possessed, the meek – those for whom life was difficult, who were taken advantage of by the powers that be. These crowds looked to Jesus in hope that he would make things different for them. He has taught them, fed them, cured their sick, cast out their demons. He must be one who has been sent from God, a prophet, one not afraid to speak truth to power, to restore God's justice and righteousness to the land. Now they've found their voice. "Hosanna!" they shout, "Save us, please! Rescue us from our misery." And not only that, but they call him the Son of David, the heir to the throne of Israel. So their hopes are more than personal. They want him to be the one to restore their people to being the great nation promised to Abraham and Sarah and fulfilled for a time under David.

Hopes are high, and for a while it looks like they might be fulfilled. Jesus challenges the authorities, as I have said, and they don't dare to oppose him openly. But behind the scenes, the wheels are in motion. They are plotting against him, looking to for a chance to separate him from his supporters, to seize him in secret and kill him. And that, of course, is just what happens. That is where we will pick up the story this coming Friday, when acting on inside information from one of Jesus' disciples, the authorities learn where he will be alone and they capture him. It's a brilliant tactical move, because not only are the crowds removed from the equation, but once they see that Jesus is in the hands of the authorities, his supporters quickly lose their voice again, and now other voices sway the crowds to turn against him. Using time-honored religious logic, they conclude that if Jesus could not stop the authorities from arresting him, then obviously he wasn't sent from God after all. Bad things don't happen to good people. His supporters may have simply given up and gone home. Or they may have been so disillusioned by Jesus' apparent change in fortune that they turned against him in rage and frustration. We don't really know the precise makeup of the crowds, but whoever they were composed of on those two different days, the day of his entrance to

Jerusalem and the day of his trial, popular opinion swings dramatically against him, and instead of shouts of “hosanna” the crowds are calling for him to be crucified.

I don’t want to get ahead of the story. We are indeed saving the passion account for Good Friday this year. But to truly appreciate what Palm Sunday is all about, we have to know where this is going. We have to be aware, as we sit here with palm leaves in our hands, that the palm-waving friends and supporters of Jesus are fair-weather friends at best, that the ones who shout “hosanna” today will be silenced on Friday in favor of those crying “crucify him.” And maybe some of those are the same people. We don’t know. But we do know that even his closest friends, the inner circle of the twelve disciples, will not stand by him. They will run away in fear. One of them will betray him. Another will deny him.

So don’t put too much stock in hosannas. Because here in a nutshell is the problem that approach to the Christian faith that puts the onus on you to make a decision to accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. Don’t be impressed by altar calls or I-Love-Jesus T-shirts, or fish logos on cars. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to know that people decide to accept Jesus, although I’m not always sure whether they know what they’re accepting. But I don’t have much faith in such declarations, because there’s always tomorrow. Where will your decision for Jesus be then? Will it join your New Year’s resolutions, the ones that lasted a week, a month? “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” That was Peter’s come-to-Jesus moment that we’ll hear on Friday. “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you,” he’ll continue. And we know how *that* turned out.

(Hold up palm leaf). So, this is kind of awkward now. And I want it to be. And part of the reason I want our hosannahs to be just a little awkward for us today is because of the long history of antisemitism that has used our Holy Week texts to demonize the Jewish people. As astonishing as it may seem in the post-Holocaust world, antisemitism is on the rise. Antisemitic acts in the U.S. have tripled since 2015, and certain politicians now regularly use antisemitic tropes and signaling to stoke resentment and win political support. It used to be common for some Christians to speak openly about Jews as “Christ killers.” That kind of talk and the attitude that went with it went into the closet half a century or so ago, but apparently it didn’t die out. So I want to be as clear as I can be that such hatred of the Jewish people is antithetical to everything that Jesus taught, and everything that he died for. Jesus was a Jew, an observant Jew even, and so were his disciples. We dare not forget that. And we dare not forget that the Jewish people are our neighbors whom God calls us to love as we love ourselves. So we should indeed feel awkward about our hosannahs if there is any hint of triumphalism in them that pits us against Jesus’ enemies in the crucifixion stories, that makes us out to be the good guys and others the bad guys. There is only one good guy in Holy Week, and it’s not you. But there is good news to go with the awkwardness. The good news is that although Jesus knows that the crowd singing his praises and waving their branches will soon desert him, or turn against him, and even though he knows that his disciples will run away, or betray or deny him, and even though he knows that your declarations of faith, and mine, are shaky and fleeting, along with our hosannahs, yet there he is, riding into the city, into the midst of his enemies, on a donkey. He rides into the teeth of the dragon unarmed, still promising that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, that it is right around the corner. He rides in peace to the cross because *his* faith does not waver. *He* has made a decision for *us*. And that, my friends, is the only decision that means anything at all. Jesus by his death and resurrection has decided to be your Lord and Savior. And that decision is a once and for all decision that will not be changed tomorrow or the next day, or ever. Don’t put too much stock in your hosannahs, sisters and brothers in Christ. But do put stock in the one who comes in the name of the Lord. For he has heard your hosannahs. And he will save. Amen.