

Sermon

Palm Sunday

April 8 and 9, 2006

Mark 11:1-11

It's an exciting day.

A day of anticipation.

A day of processions and parades.

A day to welcome a king.

King Jesus.

A day to cry out—

—“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

—Hosanna.

Hosanna

But on this Palm Sunday (weekend),

it's also a day

when things don't work out the way we expect.

We're ready for Easter.

But first comes Good Friday.

We're ready for the joy of resurrection.

But first comes

the pain of the cross.

We've been asking questions during this Lenten season.

Big questions of the faith.

Now, in this Holy Week,

I'm not really working with a theme question.

But there is a question that comes to mind.

It's Martin Luther's question.

The one he asks again and again in the Catechism.

Do you remember that question?

What is that question?

**What does this mean?**

**(Or what does this mean for us?)**

That's a question I've found myself asking

as I've been studying this Palm Sunday text from Mark.

What does this mean?

Let's start with Palms,  
Palm Branches.  
What do they mean?

Did you know that the Gospel reading we read today  
doesn't even mention palms?  
It says in verse 8,  
**...others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields.**

In fact,  
the gospel of John is the only gospel  
that mentions palm branches.  
In Mark,  
leafy branches cut in the fields.  
In Matthew,  
branches from the trees.  
In Luke,  
no branches at all.

So,  
why do we remember Palm Branches?  
What does it mean?

In the records of the Jewish people,  
in talking about the Maccabees (150 years before Jesus),  
there's a section that refers to Palm Branches.  
It says:

**They carried Palm Branches and praised God  
with all kinds of songs and musical instruments.**

Why?

Because...

**God had completely crushed their powerful enemy.**

You know what it sounds like to me?  
It sounds like the people on Palm Sunday so many years ago,  
thought that Jesus was going to bring them a military and political victory.  
They thought he was going to crush the Roman government.  
And so,  
like they did after victory  
150 years earlier,  
they waved Palm Branches.

And what did this mean?

They expected a political and military victory.

And what did they get?

They got the cross.

In fact many of them clamored for the cross,  
as the week went on.

They cried,

“Crucify him, crucify him.”

He wasn't the king they expected.

But what's ironic

is that he was the king they needed.

And he did crush their powerful enemy.

The enemy of sin

and death

and the power of the devil.

But it's so easy to miss.

Because it doesn't look the way we expect.

We expect military victory.

We get the cross.

And the cross is what saves us.

We give thanks to God

for Jesus Christ,

who died for us—on the cross.

Next question.

Hosanna.

What does this mean?

Do you know what the word Hosanna means?

We usually only say it this time of year.

It's not a word we use a lot.

Just on Palm Sunday (weekend).

What does it mean?

It means—

—**Save Us.**

That's what we're crying out.

We're saying:

Save us, Jesus.

Save us.

And how do we want Jesus to save us?

Theologian Robert Capon writes

that the typical American way of thinking about the Messiah

is not the think of Jesus,

but of Superman.

We act like we don't want a Savior who dies on the cross

and then rises again.

We want one who never dies.

So, when we cry **Hosanna—Save Us,**

our expectation,

like the crowd on the first Palm Sunday,

our expectation is a superstar.

What we want is to avoid pain.

We want everything to be happy

and feel good.

But Jesus really saves us.

How?

By suffering and dying

and giving us life on the other side of pain.

Jesus died on the cross

and then rose again.

And that life beyond the cross,  
beyond the grave,  
gives us real hope for our real lives.  
Because in our real lives  
things don't always go well.  
There is real pain.  
There are real troubles.

But we have a Messiah, Jesus,  
who gives us life beyond the pain,  
just like Jesus arose beyond the cross.

There's a part of us that hopes for Superman,  
but what we really want and need is the cross,  
Jesus saving us (Hosanna),  
through suffering and death and resurrection.

William Willimon writes:

Once, I preached on the power of prayer.  
Monday, I got a note from a woman  
who said that she could honestly say  
that she had never, in all her life,  
prayed to God to give her anything for herself.  
I don't know if that's necessarily good,  
but for her it was important.  
Her prayers were always on behalf of others.

Her daughter,  
at age 12,  
was diagnosed with a rare blood disease.  
Every day,  
twice a day,  
she prayed to God on her daughter's behalf.  
Every day.  
Twice.

At age 16,  
her daughter died.

What we want

is a world where the daughter is always healed.

Where everything turns out the way we hope.

But Jesus is a Savior

for the real world in which we live,

where the daughter sometimes dies—

—but we're never left alone.

Where the daughter might die—

—but there is hope and resurrection and life.

We live in a world

where there is real pain—

—where there is a cross.

But it is also a world

where there is life beyond the cross.

That's what Palm Sunday means.

Last question,  
    what does this mean?  
What does it mean  
    to follow Jesus?  
What does Palm Sunday tell us about that?

I was reading an article  
    by Pastor Thomas Long,  
and he pointed out something  
    I hadn't thought about.

About half of Mark's story of Palm Sunday  
    is taken up with the mundane details  
        of two disciples going to fetch a colt.

Nobody knows what these 2 disciples were thinking,  
    but they may very well have imagined for themselves  
        a much grander role on this day.  
It's not so exciting  
    being on donkey detail.

Mark doesn't name the disciples,  
    but it could have been James and John.  
Only hours before they had suggested to Jesus,  
    "Grant us to sit,  
        one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

But it hardly matters which 2,  
    because they were all seeking glory,  
        wanting to be the greatest.

So, it shows us something, I suppose,  
    that on this glorious day in Jesus' ministry,  
        a day when he's welcomed into Jerusalem  
            with joyous hosannas and leafy branches,  
2 disciples find themselves  
    in an amazingly mundane task,  
        of mucking around in a stable,  
            looking a lot like horse thieves,  
    trying to wrestle a (probably uncooperative)  
        donkey back to Jesus.  
For this they left their fishing nets?

What does this mean?

The palm branches of Palm Sunday

remind us

that Jesus is a different king than we expect.

We expect a military or political victory.

We get what we need—the cross.

As Jesus' victory comes through his death  
and resurrection.

The Hosanna of Palm Sunday

reminds us

that Jesus is a different Savior than we expect.

We would sort of like a superman.

We get what we need—the cross.

Jesus doesn't keep all the pain away.

Instead, he gives us life and peace  
on the other side of pain.

And fetching the donkey on Palm Sunday

reminds us

that following Jesus is different than we might expect.

We think it will be glamorous.

Always fun.

Always exciting.

We get what we need—the cross.

Following Jesus is an amazing journey.

It is wonderful.

It is joyful.

It is special.

It's what we were created for.

But most of it happens

in the mundane tasks of everyday life.

So,

when you go to work tomorrow morning,  
you are following Jesus  
when you do the right thing  
when no one is looking  
and no one would ever know.

You follow Jesus  
when at school,  
you sit with the kid who's sitting all alone at lunch.  
And the only reward you get  
are confused stares from your friends.

You follow Jesus  
when in your neighborhood,  
you take time to say hi  
to the neighbor across the fence.  
And ask how the day is going?

You follow Jesus  
when at home,  
you work through a disagreement with your kids  
or with your spouse,  
not giving up on the conflict  
or the relationship,  
but working to make it stronger—  
—even though it seems hard.

When we follow Jesus,  
we expect glory and honor.  
We get routine tasks,  
like fetching a donkey,  
that are at the heart of our Christian journey.

Jesus is a king,  
just not the kind of king we expect.  
And it's a good thing.  
Because Jesus is the kind of king  
we need.

In Jesus' name,  
Amen