

Sermon Text for March 20, 2016

Palm Sunday

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Zechariah 9:9-11, Revelation 7:9-17

“A different kind of Palm Sunday”

I have some great memories of Palm Sunday. Not only the palm branches with the choir processing, but it seemed like every sermon was centered on Jesus as the Prince of Peace and then we would get those long palm fronds and as kids after hearing about the Prince of Peace we would go out and do battle with each other with our palm fronds. It was very paradoxical.

But for Palm Sunday we always heard the traditional Palm Sunday Scripture of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, all 4 Gospels, as you know since you've been following the 90 Day Challenge, all 4 Gospels contain that same scene even with their own signature details. The Zechariah Scripture we heard is one of those traditional verses, except I extended it by 1 verse, vs. 11 says the following: As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. And most Palm Sundays you don't hear that part of it, but we need to today.

You see this is my 5th Palm Sunday with you and each year we have covered one of the Gospels, each year a different one, so this year we are going to have a different kind of Palm Sunday, one that comes from Revelation. You see, all along we may have heard it but we may not have understood that Palm Sunday is really about paradox, two conflicting ideas that seem to be vying for our attention. We have the paradox of the crowds cheering for Jesus as he enters Jerusalem on this Sunday, but in less than a week they will be cheering for his death. We have our king Jesus riding on a donkey, humble. The paradoxes continue.

These paradoxes of Palm Sunday are then carried out in our everyday lives. As a church, a body of believers, we are called by Jesus to turn our back on culture while we try to live in this society. It isn't easy. Our lives reflect, just naturally, the paradoxes of living faithfully, while surrounded by temptation, by being an example of who Jesus is even as we are yet sinners. On this different kind of Palm Sunday, let's see if John can help us in Revelation.

We know the story of Palm Sunday, Jesus sends his disciples to get a donkey so he can ride into Jerusalem as a triumphant, yet humble king just as Zechariah had predicted hundreds of years earlier just as we read in our first Scripture. We peg Sunday as the day he made this journey and it begins for us the journey into Holy Week. He was today at the peak of his ministry. He could do no wrong. The crowds were so enamored with him and even when the

religious leaders jealously told him to quiet his disciples he responds by saying even if they were quiet, the stones of the temple would sing his praises.

There is significance in all of that and it is centered on the palm branch. There is something significant about this branch and it has been significant for a long time. In 500 BC Egypt used to use the palm as a sign of immortality. We also know that the Jews of the 1st century were celebrating on Palm Sunday the festival of booths and on that festival they would sleep for a week in huts made out of palm branches which is why Jesus was greeted on the road into Jerusalem with palm branches. We also know from I Kings that the temple in Jerusalem would have palm branches etched on its stones so the stones shouting out Jesus' praises could have literally meant the palm branches that were found within the midst of the people without them realizing it.

But for us as Christians and for John's community in Revelation palm branches have signified martyrdom. Those carrying palm branches, as we read in our Revelation Scripture, would have been those who had died for the sake of their faith.

So, the traditional Palm Sunday Scriptures from the Gospels lead us from triumph to a sense of defeat, or at least foreboding. The triumph comes from the fact that the whole world was following, the foreboding comes from knowing that this begins Holy Week and in a few short days Jesus will be hanging on a cross. The worship services for Palm Sunday at times follow that flow. We are taken along with the crowds and realize that like them we get caught up in this cycle of obedience that turns to betrayal. We personally are committed to our complicity in the Palm Sunday narrative.

Today, both Zechariah and Revelation call out to the nations as well. It isn't just an individualistic scripture. Zechariah tells us the Messiah will command peace to the nations and Revelation has a great multitude from every nation, tribe and language. As John 3:16 reminds us God so loved the world and in this Palm Sunday narrative the entire world is a part of the story. Today you must see yourself as part of something bigger other than just an individual with choices that only affect us as individuals.

I had a couple conversations this week that left me a bit wounded, or at least wondering if the statements that I heard are true or not. One was a conversation where the person mentioned that because I have been all over the world and have had some unique experiences that I really can't relate to anyone in Lancaster County. This was a lifelong resident of Lancaster County who said this. Similarly, I was reminded of our unique situation as a family at Naomi's senior presentation at LMH this past week which recounted her life as a young woman who has lived in

realities that each were very uniquely culturally, ethnically, and even religiously different from what many kids her age have experienced.

I hope I am able to relate not only to people within this my family which happens to find itself in this county, but also see in examples that we have today in Scripture opportunities to highlight examples where the Bible speaks to us no matter where we live in this world by telling us that we are all in this together.

The Zechariah Palm Sunday scripture goes an extra verse because it tells the world that the covenant God made with all of us through his Son Jesus Christ is founded on the blood of Jesus. This is true for those living in Lancaster County as well as those living all across the world. We have that in common.

In the same way the paradoxes of Palm Sunday apply to us as we read in Revelation 7:14 that the martyr's robes are white because they were washed in the blood of the lamb. You can't get a robe white with blood. I know that, even if my laundry skills are a bit lacking, I know that at least. Blood, in fact, is hard to get out. It leaves spots that everyone can see. You can't clean a robe with blood unless it is the blood of the lamb. Only the blood of Jesus washes our sins away and makes us clean. That's the paradox that often in progressive circles we steer clear because blood implies violence and gore. But for us blood produces innocence, our innocence because it is the blood of our Savior.

I told you this was going to be a different kind of Palm Sunday. Another paradox that we find in Revelation we find in vs. 17 where we see the lamb become the what? Go ahead, look at it, the shepherd. How does that make sense? How can the lamb be the shepherd? As the book of Hebrews tells us Jesus was the sacrificial lamb on our behalf and here, we read, that on Palm Sunday we see the beginning stages of that lamb being led to the slaughter. But it is that same lamb who has become our shepherd. And then invoking the words of Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. Vs. 16: hunger no more = green pastures, thirst no more = still waters.

We are faced with Palm Sunday paradoxes and are ruled by a Lord who allows us to live in those paradoxes, who doesn't eliminate them from our lives. Did you notice what the Lord will do with our tears? He will wipe them away from our eyes. Does the Bible say that we will not have tears? No, God will not put a power shield around us so that we will never be sad, or suffer loss, or feel dejected. But God will be there to wipe the tears away from our eyes. But our lives are filled with moments of decision. Where do I go to church with my family? How do I

make a living? What relationships do I nurture? Our personal decisions affect our lives and our future. Jesus will not cause us to live lives without tears, but he will be the first to remove them.

But in the midst of our own personal decisions, we are confronted in this Scripture with a much bigger reality where we can understand that we are not in this alone but we have a family here in Strasburg and even beyond that is at this together. And we all together use a symbol which is probably the greatest paradox of our Christian faith. The cross. The cross for us reminds us of the blood of the lamb that was violently shed for our salvation. At the same time death was demanded so that resurrection could take place and deliver us from eternal death to eternal life.

Today, know that the paradox of Palm Sunday provides us with perpetual promises.