

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL  
Palm Sunday March 29, 2015**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell  
Text—Mark 11: 1-11**

Palm Sunday at All Saints Episcopal Church in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago goes like this: the people gather early in the Parish House where there is the air of carnival. Drummers and jugglers. Even, at times, clowns on unicycles. Joyous chaos and laughter. Then, after the Liturgy of the Palms and the blessing, the procession is formed and the parade begins out the Parish House door on the Wilson Avenue side, disrupting traffic on the busy street, down the block to Hermitage. Palms and streamers are waving, the drums are drumming an upbeat rhythm until they turn the corner to the church entryway. Then, the beat changes to a funereal dirge. The people enter, no longer celebrating but subdued. The carnival is over.

Although I have experienced this bit of street theater, and thoroughly enjoyed it, I am not sure that I fully appreciated how well this captures what Jerusalem must have been like on that Sunday long ago. Until the last day or two as I sat at my desk pondering the puzzle of Palm Sunday. How we observe it. What it is we think we are doing.

Oh, for years now, most churches have begun Holy Week with Palm/Passion Sunday, a curious hybrid primarily to accommodate those who do not choose to attend the services later this week. To make sure they don't leap from celebration to celebration without experiencing the horror of Jesus' walk toward his cruel death through the trial to the cross and then the tomb. Some take their palm fronds and make them into little crosses—a reminder of how quickly a symbol of triumph and victory can turn to a sign of the most brutal execution.

We have chosen, here at Grace, to celebrate only the Palms on this day, urging everyone to experience the Passion through the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday liturgies. We have chosen to reserve this time for something else—and I guess I find myself wondering just what that something else might be.

Oh, Jesus' procession from the Mount of Olives and through the Golden Gate is usually called his "triumphal entrance" to Jerusalem. The people heard that he was coming. The crowd gathered, ripping branches off trees and waving them, laying cloaks on the dusty road as if for royalty. What did they expect to see? Possibly not the raggedy procession of disciples, followers, and onlooker surrounding a man who rode on a poky little donkey rather than on a royal steed with a bridle of gold in a manner befitting a ruler. More like the other processions coming through the Damascus gate across the city—the Roman forces mounted not on donkeys but on magnificent war horses, their helmets shining, their armor and their swords displaying power. The peacekeeping troops in this week of crowds in town for Passover that could so easily get out of hand.

Maybe those people lining the roads and shouting "Hosanna" wanted a king, a hero who would rout the Romans, punish the oppressors, upset the balance of power and bring justice and peace, restore the land to them. They were shouting and singing "Hosanna to the Son of David," after

all. "Hosannah" meaning "save us." "Save us, son of David." Wouldn't the son of David be a king, a warrior? Maybe when it became clear that this humble peasant had something else in mind, maybe that was the beginning of the crowd's change in mood.

Ah, but there were three more days before Jesus and his disciples gathered for their meal and the way to Golgotha was assured. And Mark's gospel gives us a relatively concise rundown of what Jesus did in those days following his unusual entrance. We usually get these stories in small doses at other points in the liturgical year. But it is interesting, and, I think, illuminating to see Mark's sequence all in laid out before us as the prelude to the crucifixion.

First, Mark says that first day, "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." If we read on, we find that on Monday, he returned to the temple at an earlier hour than the day before. And this time, he turned over the tables and drove out the money lenders—an aggressive act that was possibly the single most provoking thing that he could have done. It would upset the Temple authorities, and if they were agitated, that would surely get the attention of the Romans!

And sure enough, the next days, Jesus taught in the Temple. And group by group, first the chief priests, scribes, and elders; then the Pharisees and Herodians; then the Sadducees, came to challenge him and his authority. It is here that Jesus uses the well known parables: the tenants who killed the heir to the vineyard; one about paying taxes to Caesar; the widow's mite; and the one that ended all the questioning: what is the most important commandment of all? They were pointed stories directed toward those who questioned him, like, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." Not stories designed to endear them to him.

He taught the disciples: the cursed fig tree that didn't bear fruit, just as the current regime did not. The Temple that could be restored in three days if it tumbled down. They should watch out for false Messiahs and stay awake for the return of the real one. And each night, he returned to Bethany to rest with his friends.

Recent scholars have posed the question of whether Jesus had carefully planned and choreographed the events of the week, beginning with the palm procession as street drama, a political statement, deliberately mocking the Roman powers, and provoking the Temple authorities to proclaim a kingdom far different from either that of Rome or what he considered to be a wrongful approach to worship.

The symbolism fits, drawing from Old Testament prophecies and beliefs—from the prophet Zechariah: the one who will save Israel, the king, will arrive humbly on a donkey—a beast of burden, not the mount of most kings. And the story tells us that Jesus planned for acquiring the donkey. In fact, half of our Gospel reading today is about getting that beast. Then the path he uses and gate through which he rides is the gate through which the Messiah would come on the way from the Mount of Olives. Then, the acts and teachings have clearly notched up from his

days of teaching in Galilee and around the countryside, as challenging as some of those teachings were. Now, he has gone public, showing to all his passion and anger for injustice and for how far the world was from God's kingdom. And these risks that he took, caused the crowd to turn, and set the stage for his death.

This is the walk we take this week, though we know that death will not be the end. Though we know that the death and the resurrection was for our benefit to help us see more clearly that kingdom and how we can be a part of bringing it about. Jesus loved that kingdom and God's people even unto death. Resolutely confronting the powers without hesitation. Revealing humbly, nonviolently, lovingly, a kingdom beyond measure. One that is here right now. Today. For you. For me. For all of God's beloved. Will you claim this kingdom, this love? Will you walk the path this week?