

Sermon for Palm Sunday
Passion Gospel adapted from Mark
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
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Holy Spirit, as you open my mouth and the ears and hearts of those who listen, let these words be your words and use them as you will. Amen.

On the Road with Jesus: The Final Stretch

“Rejoice greatly, O CHILDREN of Zion! Shout aloud, O CHILDREN of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; Triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Zech. 9:9).

On Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus’ triumphant arrival into the city of Jerusalem, on the final stretch of his journey. He has walked his entire life to fulfill his ministry, and now his last steps will take him to the cross. But not yet. First, we wave our palm branches and shout “Hosanna,” welcoming Jesus into our worship during this final stretch of Lent we call “Holy Week.” We visualize Jesus on that colt—not even a donkey or a horse—as the crowds lay their cloaks before him as if he were royalty, as if he were a king, as if he were “somebody.”

But Jesus, perhaps smiling, maybe waving back, understands one basic truth throughout this charade. No one knows who he is at all. There, in the midst of crowds, at the height of his popularity, scores of people packed around him, he is most isolated. No one knows who he is. No one.

Of course, each person in the crowd believes he or she knows who Jesus is. Each person comes with his or her own label or expectation. To some in the crowd, Jesus is the next king, the Jewish Messiah who will topple the government of Rome and bring Jerusalem and all the country back under Israeli rule. . . . They are wrong. . . and so they will turn on him.

To others, even his own disciples, he is the greatest Rabbi ever, the greatest prophet since Elijah, whose instructions will straighten out corruption and set all things right. . . . They are wrong. . . and so they will betray or abandon or flee from him.

Perhaps to others waving palms, Jesus is so popular because he is the Great Magician who turned water into wine and walked on the sea and made a banquet out of a handful of bread and fish. They can’t wait to see what great feat he will accomplish next. . . . But, they are wrong. . . and so they will taunt him and spit on him.

And to still others, this man riding on a colt—not even a donkey or a horse—is a mockery of who they are. He is a threat to their positions of power, greed, priesthood, privilege, and authority. He is out to displace them with his group of rebel-rousers . . . They, too, are wrong. . . and so they will frame him.

Yes, on this day of Jesus' so-called "triumph," he is well aware that no one really knows who he is—the sacrificial Passover Lamb, the one who has come to suffer in their place, not to usurp their places, the one who is both man and God, both terrified and resolute. Popularity is always short-lived because to maintain popularity means never being able to be fully known, and Jesus wants, longs, to be known. Once the crowds begin to realize that Jesus' intention is not to become King or the greatest rabbi or a famous magician, or even a rebel, they turn on him. Once they realize that he is nothing other than a suffering servant, useless to them, they turn on him or back away, and the rustle of the wind through all those palm branches fades to silence. This grim reality is Palm Sunday. The grand parade is a false and broken charade.

Having followed Jesus on the road these past six weeks and standing now in this place with palms on the table, on the final stretch of our Lenten walk, do we know who he is any better than we did the first Sunday of Lent, or last year at this time, or ten years ago? Are we like some of those in the crowd, clutching the same set of labels and expectations of Jesus that we have hauled around all our lives because we did not take the time to get to know him better this Lent, or we did not want to make the effort to know him, or we believe we have Jesus pegged? Who do we see passing by on the road before us this morning? Anyone? Or are we all simply play-acting? Palm Sunday is a tough day because it begs us to admit that all too often we are part of that crowd who one day shouts "Hosanna" and the next day betrays or abandons or ignores Jesus.

But the good news, and there is always good news, is that while we may not know or see Jesus, he does indeed know and see us. He knows the times when we, too, have longed to be understood and accepted just as we are, in our own reality, in our own loneliness. Jesus knows the times we have ridden on the wave of popularity and then crashed and burned. He knows the times we have entrusted another person with all that we are and then been turned on, betrayed, ignored, or used. He knows the times we have been friendless, as well as the times we ourselves have been less than friendly. He sees all of us, each heart, each life, each longing, each wound, and each joy, and he loves us. After all, he was one of us.

So here Jesus is this morning, on a colt—not even a donkey or a horse--nodding his head at each one of us, catching our eye, seeing us as we really are, better than we can even see ourselves, and he knows where this road will lead in just a short while—to an excruciating and humiliating death on a cross. He knows some of us may one day understand the extent of his love and some of us won't. He knows that some of us will want to continue following him and

some of us won't. He realizes that some of us will desire to know him even more deeply, and some of us won't. He knows that some of us will be changed by the entire parade and the week that follows, and some of us won't. And yet Jesus still rides on, on that silly colt, because the love he has is unconditional, and even if we do not know him, he knows us. And he understands.

Thanks be to God.