

Sunday, April 2, 2023
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
Matthew 21.1-11; Matthew 26.14—27.66
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher
Service Live Streamed at:
<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1176826702979134>
(Sermon begins at about 46:15)

“This Can’t Be How It Ends . . . Can It?”

Here we are, poised to begin the final leg of our Lenten journey. Although, admittedly, of the six weeks of Lent, what we face today and what lies ahead is the most rigorous, the most grueling. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually. While the vast majority of Holy Week still lies before us with our upcoming commemorations of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday, what we do today—specifically the reading of the Passion Narrative—provides a roadmap, if you will. Providing an overview of where we will go this week. Of where Jesus will lead us. Not all of the way. Not just yet. But at least enough to get to the next waystation on this dramatic journey.

Over the last six weeks of our Lenten journey, we have had a variety of guides. We started with Jesus and his temptations in the wilderness. Then we moved on to a series of unlikely guides: Nicodemus, Photini (aka the Samaritan woman at the well), the man born blind, and Lazarus. And now, we have come full circle, back to Jesus. Only Jesus has changed and grown significantly since that first encounter six weeks ago. And thanks to the lessons learned from him and our other guides, we too, have hopefully changed and grown. Jesus started this Lenten journey with a forty-day period of testing in preparation for his public ministry. Through his journey he has increasingly demonstrated who he truly is. He has increasingly shown the purpose for his life and ministry. He now begins the final leg of his journey, facing the ultimate test of his life and ministry. So, too, do we face that testing with him. We will be tested, but certainly not in the same way Jesus will be. And we will be changed by what we do witness, by what we experience in the depth of our beings. How can we not be?

To lay that foundation, to provide that roadmap, today we commemorate Palm Sunday. Also known as Passion Sunday. What I think of as the most schizophrenic day of the liturgical year. Not in the clinical sense, but in the colloquial sense. A day that is characterized by wildly contradictory qualities and events. A day that chronicles the events of the coming week. A day that brings with it the full range of human emotions. From joy and exaltation to the depths of despair, and everything in between.

We begin with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with people waving palm branches and hailing Jesus as a king, as the long-awaited Messiah, with shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Then, as the events of the week unfold—a week that for most of those gathered in Jerusalem was filled with great joy in anticipation of the annual celebration of Passover, the most holy and joyous time of the year—for Jesus and his disciples things take a dark and ominous turn. The celebration of the Passover meal starts joyously but descends into darkness and despair as it is

revealed that one of the inner circle will betray Jesus and turn him over to the temple authorities. As Jesus is arrested while praying in a garden with his closest disciples. As he faces trial before the Roman authorities on trumped up charges of heresy and sedition. As the crowds, those who a few days before cheered “Hosanna to the Son of David!” now cry out “Let him be crucified!” As he is falsely found guilty and sentenced to death. As he is mocked, tortured, and forced to walk through the streets of Jerusalem in humiliation carrying the instrument of his impending death. As he is nailed to a cross—the cruelest form of execution ever devised by humanity; a form of execution reserved for political enemies of the empire. As he dies a painful death, his followers having abandoned him—except for his mother and a handful of women who look on from a distance. Ending with Jesus, dead, his lifeless body taken from the cross, prepared for burial, and placed in a cold tomb.

This is our king? This is our Messiah? It certainly seemed that way when we started this journey. But now? What happened? How could things have gone so horribly wrong? This can't be how it ends . . . can it?