

**Sunday, March 29, 2026**  
**Palm Sunday (Year A)**  
Matthew 21.1-11  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Hosanna!”**

Today we begin the final leg of our Lenten quest on this, the day that is known as both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. Or, as officially designated in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, “The Sunday of the Passion: [colon] Palm Sunday.” A day that is sure to give us liturgical whiplash. Beginning, as we did today with the blessing of palms, celebrating Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” And then, within a matter of minutes, launching into the Passion Narrative, with the story of Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, his trial before Pontius Pilate with calls of “Let him be crucified,” his being sentenced to death, and ultimately, his crucifixion. The events of six days being compressed into an hour. And, in so doing, leaving us no time to linger, to fully absorb the meaning, the ramifications, of each component event.

A couple of weeks ago, I had a conversation with a clergy colleague who, like me, was not raised in the Episcopal Church. We were lamenting the seeming awkwardness of our Palm Sunday commemoration. How going from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify him!” in the same service just does not feel right somehow. Particularly when you get the same story repeated again just a few days later on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Ideally, Palm Sunday should be just that: the celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Leave the Passion to where it belongs: to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Trying to conflate it all just makes for a less-than-satisfying liturgical experience. If not liturgical overwhelm.

Of course, we get why we do what we do. The realities are that, particularly in our modern culture, some people are not able to commit to the rigors of Holy Week: to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, followed by the Great Vigil of Easter and Easter Sunday. Five services in eight days. Recognizing that it really does not make any sense to solely celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry on Palm Sunday and then to immediately celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday. There would be a huge disconnect. One week Jesus is alive and the next he is being resurrected? Wait, what happened in between? How did we get here? It would be like watching a TV series and missing a couple of episodes that were critical to the storyline. You would just be lost. So, the Church realized that we need to provide a way to present the whole story for those who cannot participate in the full array of Holy Week services. Hence, the combining of Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. Not ideal, but it works. For the most part.

The one downside is that, more often than not, the Palm Sunday part, the triumphal entry part, gets overshadowed by the Passion Sunday part. Not only liturgically, but also in the preaching. And while sometimes the two events—triumphal entry and Passion—are juxtaposed in sermons, the full weight of the triumphal entry tends to get diluted. So, today, I ask you to temporarily suspend what you just heard in the Passion Narrative, and go back to the story of the triumphal entry that we heard read in the courtyard.

While there is not a lot of detail provided in the 12 verses of the Gospel of the Palms, there IS a lot of symbolism. Symbolism that is worth considering so as to have a more solid foundation on which to build our understanding of the events that follow in the Passion, as well as Easter.

We are told that Jesus began his trek into Jerusalem from Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. Jesus could have entered Jerusalem from any direction he wanted. The approach from the Mount of Olives would have actually been the more arduous, being a two-mile trek down fairly rough terrain. So why this path?

The short answer? To fulfill prophecy. The Mount of Olives, roughly two miles east of the Old City of Jerusalem, has long been associated with the coming of the Messiah. Zechariah contains prophecies of a messianic king, following the defeat of Israel's enemies, riding down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem and establishing God's reign. This would have been a profoundly significant route for the Messiah to enter Jerusalem, as the Temple, the physical representation of God's earthly home, was on the eastern edge of the City. One of the gates in the eastern wall, the Golden Gate or the Gate of Mercy, providing direct access to the Temple. So this would have been the most direct route to the logical destination for the Messiah. And while not necessarily part of the reason, the descent from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem affords dramatic views of the entire city and the surrounding area. A visual representation of the extent of the messianic king's realm.

The Mount of Olives was also associated in ancient prophecies with the resurrection of the dead. Because of this association, the Mount of Olives has been the location of a huge Jewish cemetery for over 3,000 years. The cemetery covers a large portion of the approach to Jerusalem, containing over 150,000 graves. One can't help but wonder what Jesus must have been thinking and feeling as he rode through this cemetery with endless rows of graves. Traversing a monument to death, on a mountain associated with prophecies of resurrection, as he himself moved closer and closer to what awaited him in Jerusalem. As he rode right past the Garden of Gethsemane where, in just a few days, he would be arrested while praying.

Taken together, Jesus' descent of the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem would have been a powerful symbol of what awaited him. A powerful symbol of who he truly was. Sending a powerful message among his followers confirming that he is indeed the Messiah prophesied of old, and that in this role, he would provide for the resurrection of the dead. Foreshadowing what would happen in a week's time with his own death and resurrection.

The processional entry into the City, with Jesus riding a donkey, would have sent another powerful message. Entry processions were nothing new to Roman-occupied Jerusalem. Under the Romans, processional entries into a city were important occasions, usually involving the arrival of a general, a governor, or other high-ranking official. Such processions were a means of displaying Roman political and military power. Jesus' own entry procession would have sent a similar message, that this was an important event. However, it would have sent a very different message than that intended by the Romans. Whereas Roman officials typically entered astride a warhorse—yet one more symbol of Rome's power and might—Jesus entered on a donkey. A lowly pack animal. The symbolism, the juxtaposition, would have been striking. As compared with the Roman use of warhorses, Jesus arriving on a donkey would have sent a message of humility and peace over against Rome's focus on military power and might. A message that

Jesus' purpose was one of service, over against Rome's purpose of domination. Jesus' own version of a "No Kings Day" march.

To further highlight this juxtaposition between Jesus and the Roman occupiers, there is a story that as Jesus was making his triumphal entry from the east, Pontius Pilate was entering Jerusalem from the west. Coming from his headquarters in Caesarea to provide enhanced military presence during the upcoming Passover festival. While Jesus arrived on a donkey accompanied by disciples and supporters, waving palms—an ancient symbol of liberation—and shouting "Hosanna!", Pilate arrived on a warhorse, accompanied by soldiers, cavalry, and displays of power designed to intimidate and maintain order during a potentially tense time, most likely met with taunts and boos from the locals. Two processions, dramatically demonstrating contrasting authorities: the Kingdom of God versus *Pax Romana*. The two processions not intersecting that day, but setting up a clash that would occur in five days' time. When Jesus would be presented for trial before Pilate.

There is something else worth noting about Jesus' triumphal entry. One that literally gets lost in translation. And yet, which casts Jesus' triumphal entry and the response of the crowds in a different light. The Gospels tell us that throughout the procession leading to Jerusalem, Jesus was met with shouts of "Hosanna!" Shouts of praise and adoration. And they certainly were that, and more. Shouts of encouragement, shouts of support, shouts of joy. But "Hosanna" literally means "save us." How poignant. That those shouts of praise and adoration were rooted in a fervent plea: save us. Save us.

A powerful reminder that this is what the remainder of the story, the Passion Narrative, is about. That those Palm Sunday shouts of "Hosanna", with their root meaning of "save us," underscore what happens on Good Friday. That the Good Friday shouts of "Crucify him!" are ultimately not contrary to the Palm Sunday shouts of "Hosanna!" but rather are, in a very real way, the means to "Hosanna!," to us being saved, come Easter.

Hosanna! Save us!