

Palm Sunday is always a mixed-up time for me... It's a Sunday of mixed messages. We start with celebration, waving the palm branches and remembering how the people of Jesus' day cheered for him as their Savior. "Hosanna!" But we end up looking toward the Cross and the fact that the Savior winds up being mocked, humiliated, and killed by the same people who earlier had cheered him on.

Palm Sunday "Hosannas" turned into "Crucify Him!" Peter's promise, "I will never deny you" became "I don't know him!" The excitement of the king's entry morphed into a court case and then a tortuous killing.

Palm Sunday: Do we celebrate today, or do we weep? Perhaps it's appropriate to do both. Palm Sunday calls into question all our motives, our promises, our declarations of faith... Even though Easter happened and Jesus rose from the dead, much of the time our decisions and the situations of our lives call *us* into question. Why do we still "fall asleep" when we should pray? Why is it that we find it so easy to deny Jesus in our lives and to choose paths of less-than-love in our dealings with others? Why do we turn away from our Lord when he doesn't do things as we think they should be done?

The people in Jesus' day thought that Jesus had come to Jerusalem to kick the Romans out of their land and to make Israel a great nation again. When they cried out "Hosanna," they meant, "Savior, deliver us from the Romans." It didn't happen. Jesus was indeed their King, but not the kind of king they wanted. Perhaps some of the folks today in Egypt, Syria, Central African Republic, Ukraine, as well as other nations where people are desperate for change, can relate to the hopes of the people in Jerusalem as they claimed Jesus to be their King. "Hosanna" is a cry of praise that also cries out for help. The people were hoping that this Jesus would become like a Rambo leader to free them from the heavy Roman rule.

But Jesus did not do what they wanted. Their hopes were quickly dashed, and they became angry. The Bible tells us that the Jewish religious leaders fanned the flames of this anger because they wanted to get rid of this troublemaking Jesus. Actually, Jesus *was* offering them deliverance, but it was not from the Romans. Jesus came to deliver us all from sin and death and from all those things that keep us from loving God and loving each other... We may be more like those Palm Sunday people than we think, though, as we try to get Jesus to do what we want in our lives: "Help me win the lottery, Jesus, and I will believe in you.... Make my child well, Lord, and then I will serve you till my dying day." "Hosanna!" The people in Jesus' day turned their backs on him and turned their hatred towards him when he did not deliver what they wanted... When Jesus does not deliver what WE want, we may become apathetic, we may quit going to church, we may declare that we do not need God... Reason to weep...

From this side of Easter, Christians can celebrate what the people of Jesus' Palm Sunday could not: we are able to celebrate the fact that we have a God who loves us SO much that he laid his

own life down for us... A God who has showed us the way and power of love instead of hatred. Today we need not cry so much for the fact that Jesus suffered and died, because we know that by so doing he broke the power of death for all of us.... But we *should* cry for the ways we continue to ignore his sacrifice for us, and we should mourn the way we are too often half-hearted in being his followers.

In preparing for this sermon, I ran across a couple of illustrations which may be meaningful. In the context of the question, "Do we celebrate or weep today?" I offer you these illustrations with their messages, and pray that God will speak to each of us, as we need it, today and all through this Holy Week.

Legend has it that during his celebrated trip to the Orient, Marco Polo, a merchant and adventurer from Venice, was taken before the great and fearsome ruler, Genghis Khan. One false move could cost him his life. Polo decided to tell the story of Jesus as it is recorded in the gospels. It is said that when Marco Polo related the events of Holy Week, and described Jesus' betrayal, his trial, his scourging and crucifixion, Genghis Khan became more and more agitated, more engrossed in the story, and more tense. When Marco Polo pronounced the words, "Then Jesus bowed his head and yielded up his spirit," Genghis Khan could no longer contain himself. He interrupted, bellowing, "What did the Christian's God do then? Did he send thousands of angels from heaven to smite and destroy those who killed his Son?"

Not at all. God forgave us. God did not let human hatred and death have the last word. Instead, God brought forth new life and forgiveness and hope in the face of the worst we could dish out. God's ways are not the ways of a human conqueror.

Today our world seems in many ways out of control, beyond redemption, beyond the bounds of forgiveness. Suicide bombings are reported regularly, cheating companies and politicians proliferate; lawyers, accountants, and even clergy are being caught for victimizing others; we even have stabbings in our schools... Each day seems to offer more and more bad news... We may feel the same about our lives, that they are out of control, beyond redemption, past the possibility of forgiveness. .. It's enough to make us weep.

In the face of the discouraging or overwhelming aspects of our lives, we are encouraged to take heart, for in Jesus we have a king who brings not troops or weapons, but a basin of Living Water, to cleanse, soothe and heal our lives, and he brings a challenge for us, to take the same basin of forgiveness and hope to serve others.

This leads to another illustration, which has to do with how we let our lives be used. Preacher Bill Bouknight suggests that, just as the man in Matthew 21 let his donkeys be used by Jesus, so we each have things God wants to use today. In Bouknight's words:

"I could say it like this: All of us are supposed to be donkey-givers. But in order to understand that, I must introduce you to a man Jesus met long ago. This man is a mysterious fellow. We are not told his name or his profession. We don't know what he looked like or how he came to know Jesus. All we know is what he gave. He loaned his donkey to Jesus to ride as he entered

Jerusalem for the last time.

Hundreds of years earlier the prophet Zechariah had predicted that the coming Messiah would make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Listen to his words: ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and sitting on a donkey...’ (Zechariah 9:9) The guy with the donkey made it possible for that scripture to be fulfilled.”

Preacher Bouknight continued with a challenge to all the church today to let our “donkeys” be used by God.... Maybe not a donkey, but what about a car? Perhaps somebody a ride... Or maybe you have a few extra dollars. Perhaps you can help someone who is in financial stress. Or a musical talent, or computer skills, or a listening ear or a friendly smile. Whatever God has given you, it just may be needed for use by the Master! Not only on Sundays, but wherever you are all through the week and throughout your lifetime!

Today begins the week known as Holy Week. During the first Holy Week Jesus showed us most clearly the meaning of love and power. Remember how, right as we started Lent, the newly-baptized Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? After 40 days without eating, Jesus was tempted by Satan: “If you really are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread...If you really *are* God’s Son, leap from the highest tower and discover the protection to which you are entitled...” The temptations in the wilderness were not so different from the ones Jesus faced during the first Holy Week. If you really are God’s Son, prove it! Use the power, save yourself!!

But Jesus did not come to accept Satan’s or the human definition of power; instead, Jesus brought a new definition – a paradoxical understanding of true power: “In order to gain life, one must be willing to lose it. Greater love has no one than to lay down his/her life for the sake of another.” This, Jesus would have us see and understand, is real power. This is power that cannot die with death. This is the power to forgive when someone has hurt you badly, the power that can release someone from the prison of anger and resentment and trying to get even. This is the power of lifting someone else up when others would choose to put that person down. **This is what we do when we do what God wants us to do.**

As we heard from Paul’s letter to the Philippian Christians, Jesus was not one to grab at the kind of power our world understands. Instead, he humbled himself.... This week, as we share the Last Supper and Tenebrae service on Thursday night, we will be reminded once again of how Jesus put himself in the role of *servant*, in spite of the fact that he was - and is - worthy of being served.

Power, true power, comes when we so trust that we are in God’s care that we can let go of our grasp on money, status, and ambition, and instead spend our time and energy to help others have enough to eat and the power to make decisions of their own. *This is power.*

This week, Holy Week, we will surely see and hear a lot more in the papers and on the news about people and companies grabbing and scrapping for power. Let us make sure that we keep

before us what Jesus Christ has shown us through his own actions about power: In order to save your life, you must be willing to lay it down. This is possible only because of what the Bible promises: God is with us; God's everlasting arms are always supporting us; nothing is lost in God's unfailing economy.

This week, each of us has a choice, every day, whether or not to let it be Holy. Every hour, each encounter, our time can be holy when we measure ourselves by the Holy Week walk of our Savior, Jesus. Am I "hitting back" or offering love and forgiveness in the face of what somebody else is doing to me? Am I showing love to those who do not have power in their lives? Am I REALLY following Jesus and doing what he would have me do today? Holy Week questions good for all time.

Let this week be holy. Celebrate, weep, and ask God to lead you through this week and through your life to the truth and healing of Easter. Amen.