

Sermon for Palm Sunday

Date: April 14, 2019

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 32:36–39

Epistle Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

Gospel Reading: John 12:1-19

Sermon Text: John 12:1-19

Sermon Title: Fly the Flag of Freedom

Hymns:

LSB 433 – Hosanna, Loud Hosanna

LSB 442 – All Glory, Laud, and Honor

LSB 433 – Glory Be to Jesus

LSB 437 – Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed

LSB 455 – The Royal Banners Forward Go



Liturgy:

Divine Service: Special



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Text: John 12:1-19

Six days before Passover, Jesus arrived in Bethany. Lazarus whom Jesus had brought back to life lived there. Dinner was prepared for Him there. Martha served the dinner and Lazarus was one of the people eating with Jesus.

Mary took a pint sized bottle of very expensive perfume made from pure nard and poured it on Jesus' feet. Then she dried his feet with her hair. The fragrance of the perfume filled the house.

One of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was going to betray him, asked, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for a high price (it was worth about a year's wages) and the money given to the poor?" (Judas didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the moneybag, and he would help himself to what was put in it.)

Jesus said to Judas, "Leave her alone, that she may keep it for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor with you but you will not always have me with you."

A large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was in Bethany. They went there not only to see Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom Jesus had brought back to life. The chief priests planned to kill Lazarus too, because Lazarus was the reason why many people were leaving the Jews and believing in Jesus.

On the next day the large crowd that had come for the Passover festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went to meet him. They were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel!"

Jesus obtained a donkey and sat on it, as Scripture says, "Do not be afraid, people of Zion! Your king is coming. He is riding on a donkey's colt." At first Jesus' disciples didn't know what these prophecies meant. However, when Jesus was glorified, the disciples remembered that these prophecies had been written about him. The disciples remembered that they had taken part in fulfilling the prophecies.

The people who had been with Jesus when he called Lazarus from the tomb and brought him back to life reported what they had seen. Because the crowd heard that Jesus had performed this miracle they came to meet him. The Pharisees said to each other, "This is getting us nowhere. Look! The whole world is following him!"

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May God's peace, and His victory over sin, give you comfort in Jesus' name. Amen.

It is one week before the Passover celebration. Jesus is now in Bethany, less than a day's walk to Jerusalem. Mary, Martha and Lazarus are some of Jesus' closest friends, so He makes one last stop at their house to have dinner with them before He goes to His death in Jerusalem. Jesus enjoyed spending time with these two sisters and a brother because they understood why He was there. They got it. It is a very special meal where Mary anoints Jesus for His death. Sadly we also see Judas has already filled his heart with corruption and contempt.

After a good night's sleep they are up the next morning and the final leg of Jesus' journey to the great city of David has started. He is now taking that last road to Jerusalem. The large crowd that had come, to see Him and Lazarus yesterday, grows and grows as more and more people learn that Jesus is heading into the city.

Jesus has claimed to be the Messiah. He has defeated the Temple authority, teaching that the meek will inherit the earth. The crowds don't really understand all that Jesus is here to do yet, but they will. In time they'll understand, but right now they still think the Messiah is a political savior. One who will free them from Rome and return them to the glory they had under great king David and Solomon.

In their excitement and frenzy they shout, "Hosanna!" They also pick up palm branches and wave them wildly in the air in joyous celebration. Did you ever ask why? Why was the crowd shouting "Hosanna" and waving palms?



Hosanna is a Hebrew word. It means, "Please save" or "Save now." The crowds didn't understand that Jesus had come to save them eternally. They were thinking He had come to save them from Rome.

Now if you knew Hebrew you could have figured out what Hosanna meant, but what about the palm branches? Why were they waving palm branches?

I've mentioned this from time to time, about all the science we throw at the Scriptures to understand what they mean. We don't just guess. We put very real and serious efforts into studying the events recorded to help us grasp why God would bring these words to us.

Here is one of those places where science, the sciences of archaeology and socio-anthropology help us a great deal. To understand what is happening here I want to take you to another day. The day is the fourth of July. Independence day for the United States of America. What do we wave on that day? Obviously you know it is the American flag. Why do we do it? Because it is the symbol of American independence, American freedom, and the America spirit of opportunity for all.



We can all wave those flags because we have great machines that can produce those flags for us in great quantities. Everyone can get at least a small flag somewhere. Back at the time Jesus walked this Earth that was not the case. Flags were for the elite of society, those who could afford to spend money on expensive things like strong fabric for decoration.

We also need to understand what the palm branch meant. It was a national symbol in Israel. It was their symbol of independence, freedom, and victory. Those palm branches were not just something to wave. They were a symbol, a declaration of independence from Rome. An independence they longed for, and believed that Jesus could bring to them. So they waved them wildly. They waved them and shouted at the top of their voices, "Save us now!" They spread their cloaks on the ground in front of Him.¹



What John is recording here for us is a record of events that will help us better understand why they will all turn on Jesus when Pilate has Him. The people believed Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted their freedom. Unknown to them Jesus wanted – needed – to die, to give them that freedom. Jesus was giving them freedom, but not a freedom they understood. They will turn on Him believing He has failed, failed in His plans, failed them, failed everyone. They will lose all hope trapped in the clutches of Rome. In that frustration they will shout new words, "Crucify Him!"

1 Matthew 21:8

There is a poetic irony in these events. They wanted freedom. They craved it. They were desperate for it. They would be willing to fight any war to get it. All they wanted was a leader to show them the way, and they would follow him anywhere. They just wanted their freedom.

Freedom is just what Jesus was giving them. Jesus was bringing far more freedom than they could possibly understand. In fact I am convinced that we also do not fully understand what Jesus' freedom really means. I don't think we will fully grasp it until we see Him face to face. We could not possibly understand the freedom Jesus has brought to us. We could not grasp all that He has given us because we haven't seen it yet.

We see all that Jesus is doing right now as He enters the city. It looks like He is winning for a moment, then it all falls apart and it will look like He has utterly failed. One of His very own closest disciples will turn traitor and betray Him. The Temple Authority will hold an illegal nighttime trial and convict Him on, what is clear to everyone there, trumped up charges. They will lie to Pilot repeatedly in their efforts to get Jesus killed.



Even the people will turn on Jesus calling for His death. His disciples will all abandon Him. Even the closest, Peter, James and John will run. Peter will even deny knowing Him with harsh language and curses.² It is all going to look like a real mess. It is all going to look like Jesus' failure is utterly complete, but it's not.

In fact that is the farthest from the truth you could possibly get. The truth is Jesus is in absolute control throughout every event, every moment. Everything is going according to His plan. Rome thinks they've won. The Temple Authority think they've won. Satan thinks he's won. Even the people think they've won, in that they have brought down one whom they believed filled them with false hope.

It looks like everyone has won except Jesus. Jesus will go willingly to His death,

2 Matthew 26:74

and there will endure one of the most horrible and violent deaths that human kind has ever invented. Satan will command “Death” and “Grave” to hold Him, his command is, “Do not let go at any price! The Son of God must die!”

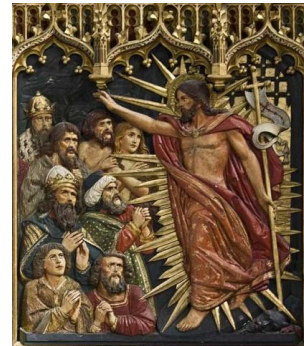
Through all of this pain and torture Jesus will say, “Father curse them all for what they have done to Me. See I am innocent!” Right? No!!

He says, “Father forgive them.”³ Even in that living-nightmare Jesus is still thinking only of us, so great is His love and concern for us. Yet Satan will not relent. Every fiber of his being, and all that he commands, will be focused on tearing Jesus apart. “The Son of God must die!”

Then it happens. The ground shakes. Jesus cries out, and then speaks those words through torment and exhaustion, “It is finished!”⁴ As He speaks those words you can imagine there was a celebration in the depths of Hell like has never been seen by the eyes of angels or demons. Satan had won. He had kill the Son. The Earth and all it contains would be his forever.⁵

The celebration would go wild with exuberance... until...

Until there is a knock at the door. Who could have possibly missed the party? Who could possibly come late to the greatest celebration Hell has ever seen? One of the demons opens the door, and there, standing before him is HIM! Jesus the Holy Christ, the Lamb of the Most High God, making another triumphal entry, and He has a message for Satan and all who followed him.



That message is, “You are condemned. You have lost.⁶ All authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Me.⁷ I have saved My people. You have lost and your failure will be eternal. Nothing but the most horrible depths of the abyss of Hell now wait for you with an open maw of insatiable appetite. You are condemned!”

3 Luke 23:34

4 John 19:30

5 Luke 20:14

6 1 Peter 3:19

7 Mathew 28:18

That would be the end of the party. Now there is nothing but worry, and terror-filled anticipation, because they know what is coming. Now they have no other desire than to drag you down with them. But you, children of God, have nothing to fear. The war is not yours. In fact the war is over. Your salvation has been won. You are free. By the faith the Holy Spirit has grown in your heart you are utterly free.

You see Jesus did bring freedom. You have the right to wave those palms in the air and shout, “Hosanna!!” Because Jesus has saved you! You are free! That is what this week is all about – freedom. The freedom that was once represented by palm branches, not entirely unlike the one you hold right now.

Amen.

