

## Should We Be Celebrating?

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*Mark 11:7-10 — Then two of the disciples brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

You may or may not know this already, but many churches don't celebrate Palm Sunday. Instead of re-telling the story of Jesus's parade into Jerusalem in the last week of his life, and instead of waving palm branches and creating our own version of that parade, many churches observe what they call Passion Sunday: one week before Easter, they re-tell, all in one sitting, scripture's stories of Jesus's arrest, trial, torture, and death.

Personally, I can see two pretty good reasons for doing Passion Sunday instead of Palm Sunday. First, if you aren't able to join us for our Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services later this week, then you won't get to hear and experience, alongside your community of faith, the stories of Jesus's arrest, trial, torture, and death. You'll just go straight from celebrating Palm Sunday in church to celebrating Easter in church, go from cheerfully waving Palm Branches to cheerfully shouting, “He is risen!” And that doesn't seem quite right, does it? I mean, it doesn't do justice to the cross and Jesus's suffering—and, I would add, it doesn't do justice to *your* crosses and *your* suffering. By that, I mean if we want to have a robust spiritual life, we have to be willing to sit with pain and reckon with despair. Passion Sunday services carve out time and space for that precise purpose. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean we shouldn't celebrate Palm Sunday here; it just means you should try to come to our services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

But there's another pretty good reason, as I see it, for why a church might choose Passion Sunday over Palm Sunday. And this reason has to do with what happened during the original parade, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and what happened afterwards. See, when the crowds in the streets are shouting, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest,” they are saying, “We believe this man Jesus is the Messiah.” The prophets foretold and legend held that the Messiah would be a descendent of the great King David—which Jesus was. And the Messiah's task, the Messiah's destiny—everyone knows—is to restore the kingdom of Israel. The Messiah will make Israel an independent, magnificent nation again, bucking off the foreign imperial rule under which Jesus's people, the Jews, have lived for hundreds of years. Shouts of “Hosanna!”—a Hebrew term meaning “Save us!”—may sound pleasant and harmless to our modern ears, but make no mistake: this was a political rallying cry—and maybe, just maybe, the beginning of an uprising.

If there was ever a time to begin, this is it: it's the Jewish holiday of Passover in our story, a holiday that commemorates the ancient Israelites' exodus out of Egypt. Each year, during Passover, the population of Jerusalem swells, as people united by religious devotion and nationalist hopes come from far and wide to remember together the time when God liberated their people from another imperial ruler—Pharaoh. Everyone in the parade who's waving a palm branch and shouting these words is ready for this Messiah, ready for his coming kingdom, ready for their people to rise up.

And here's where our church's celebration of Palm Sunday starts to look, maybe, a little weird. Because the Messiah they were all hoping for, the kingdom they were all waiting to see—it didn't come. Jesus did not lead his people towards a revolt against Rome; instead, he led the paraders straight to their own temple, then made a mess by turning over some tables, and then told them to focus on making their own lives more just, regardless of who is ruling over them. This didn't sit well with the temple leadership, or with the many who wanted an uprising. What's more, the parade didn't sit well with Rome, and before one week was up, this unconventional rabbi and controversial prophet got himself arrested, convicted, tortured, and killed. The hope that spawned this politically charged parade was swiftly, mercilessly snuffed out. The cries of "Hosanna!" seemed all for naught. The whole thing seemed like one big failure. Now, knowing this, why would we *celebrate* Palm Sunday? Why would we be so merry this morning about something that led to disappointment and despair for so many?

At least a few of us, I'm guessing, have a good answer in mind. "Because that's not how the story ends," we'd say. "Our scriptures proclaim that the kingdom Jesus came to restore was not the literal kingdom of Israel, but the kingdom of God, which is still breaking into our world. Our scriptures proclaim that Jesus rose from the grave three days after his crucifixion, and in so doing he ultimately defeated the forces of oppression and death not just for his own people, the Jews, but for all people. Our scriptures proclaim that Jesus has saved us, and is still saving us, beyond what the paraders around him realized." So, we wave the palm branches and say, "It wasn't a failure; it was just different from what people expected."

That's a good answer, I think. But it leads me to ask another question: instead of minimizing or dismissing the disappointment and despair, the sense of failure that the paraders felt, might we want to honor and incorporate it? What if, when we celebrated Palm Sunday, we named and somehow held the fact that the masses hoped and believed that Jesus would restore the kingdom of *Israel*, but that didn't happen, and for them, that was tragic? What if, in all of our celebrations, we remained mindful of our disappointments and failures, rather than shrugging them off or ignoring them?

Because we often do that, right? Whether we're celebrating inside or outside of church, whether it's a formal event or a just a casual conversation, we often feel like if we're going to be happy, we can't also be sad. If we're feeling good, or if we want to feel good, we should try to keep out any "bad" thoughts or feelings. If we are celebrating, then it is *not* the time to mourn something, miss someone, acknowledge anxiety, or even just feel a bit down.

One of my favorite spiritual authors, Henri Nouwen, wrote this in one of his many books, *Here and Now*: “In the world about us, a radical distinction is made between joy and sorrow. People tend to say: ‘When you are glad, you cannot be sad, and when you are sad, you cannot be glad.’ In fact, our contemporary society does everything possible to keep sadness and gladness separated. Sorrow and pain must be kept away at all cost because they are the opposites of the gladness and happiness we desire. Death, illness, human brokenness...all have to be hidden from our sight because they keep us from the happiness for which we strive. ... The vision offered by Jesus stands in sharp contrast to this worldly vision. Jesus shows, both in his teachings and in his life, that true joy often is hidden in the midst of our sorrow, and that the dance of life finds its beginnings in grief. Jesus says: ‘Unless the grain of wheat dies, it cannot bear fruit. Unless we lose our lives, we cannot find them; unless the Son of Man dies, he cannot send the Spirit.’ Here a completely new way of living is revealed. It is the way in which pain can be embraced, not out of a desire to suffer, but in the knowledge that something new will be born in the pain.”

Friends, this is the way Jesus enters Jerusalem in this last week of his life. Surrounded by merry, expectant paraders, Jesus knows that he is headed towards arrest and death. And yet, he keeps leading the parade, believing that something new will be born in his pain, by the power and love of God at work in him. Like Jesus, may each of us grow in our ability to hold our joy and our sorrow together, not hiding or downplaying one for the sake of the other. As we worship, let us remember pain. And as we feel pained, let us remember to worship. Amen.