

“Celebration in the Midst of Turmoil”  
Based on Matthew 21: 1-11  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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I loved Palm Sunday when I was a kid. Probably because of the palm waving. Maybe for the wonderful hymns which we only get to sing one day a year. Perhaps it had something to do with the anticipation of Easter baskets, egg hunts and candy only a week away. Whatever the reason, I almost preferred Palm Sunday to Easter itself. So I was disappointed to learn that somewhere along the way, Palm Sunday became “Palm/Passion” Sunday. Apparently, the thinking was that most people don’t go to the weekday services during Holy Week so they’d go from the high of the triumphal entry to the high of the resurrection without ever visiting the Gethsemane or Calvary much less the tomb. So this morning, many churches will devote most of the worship services the Passion. Perhaps they’ll give a nod to Palm Sunday at the beginning of the service. Perhaps not. But as far as I’m concerned Palm Sunday is PALM Sunday. As far as I’m concerned, we need the palms just as much as we need Gethsemane and Calvary. (Plus, I know you all will be back on Thursday and Friday for those services.)

Interestingly, I’ve noticed this year a bit of a pendulum swing back. Now commentators are starting to ask, “Hey. Whatever happened to Palm Sunday? Whatever happened to the triumph and celebration? What are we losing by leaving out Jesus’ welcome as the Messiah? What are we losing by skipping straight to the crucifixion? Are we too focused on death?”

Palm Sunday. It’s a confused holiday even without sharing billing with the Passion. The day of the church year when we “celebrate” the “triumphal” entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. We don’t need to be reminded that today is the beginning of the week that will end with Jesus on the cross then in the tomb. Maybe the Passion has made its way up to Sunday because, under the circumstances, waving our palms and singing our praises seems a little out of place. A little bit like celebrating the call “dead man walking” as an inmate leaves his cell for the last time. It’s difficult to get too invested in the Palm Sunday celebration knowing where it leads. Knowing that by the end of the week, these very crowds calling out “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” today will be crying “Crucify him!” on Friday. And yet celebration is precisely what we are called to. Celebration is precisely what we need. A respite between the solemnity, repentance and reflection of the Lenten season and the tragic Holy Week descent of betrayal, denial, arrest, persecution, crucifixion, tomb. We need the reminder of why it all matters. Because this dead man walking is the Messiah, the Son of David, King of Kings, over whom death will not have the last say. It has been said that on this day, “Celebration and praise converge with loss and grief; strength and vulnerability share one liturgical moment, inviting us to shout ‘Hosanna!’ while also bracing ourselves for the poignancy of the crucifixion and the mourning that follows.”

It is significant that Jesus' procession begins at the Mount of Olives for, according to the prophet Zechariah (14: 1-11), that is where the Messiah is to appear. As this joyous parade marches on we know as one commentator notes, "There will be a cost, of course—[Jesus] has already told the disciples about his impending death (20:17-29)—but, for now, that horrifying reality is pushed into the background as the crowds wave branches and spread garments on the road in a first century version of the ticker-tape parade."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Matthew's gospel, the term "the crowds" is used to represent Jesus' large following of disciples beyond The Twelve. "The crowds" function as a character. Like the Twelve, the crowds will fail Jesus. And though the crowds will turn on Jesus later in the week, calling for his crucifixion, at this time, they recognize him as the Messiah. They cry, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Hosanna! An Aramaic exclamation of praise that literally means "save (or help), I pray!"<sup>2</sup>

And in Jerusalem there is great turmoil, the whole city asking "who is this?" And the word used here, translated as "turmoil" also means "tremble." The whole city is trembling. It is a form of the same word used for the earthquakes when Jesus dies on Friday and at the angel's appearance at the empty tomb next Sunday. This is the turmoil, the shaking of the earth that signifies the presence of God.

Jerusalem trembles and the whole city asks "who is this?" The crowds of disciples reply, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." But the real answer is in their cheers along the parade route: he is the Son of David, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. In other words, this Jesus of Nazareth, this ordinary looking guy awkwardly riding in on a donkey—or as Matthew would have it, riding on *both* a donkey *and* a colt (I'm not quite sure how that's supposed to work...)—this guy on a donkey is the Messiah. Ironically, Jesus' triumphal entry is in essence, an anti-triumph. Rather than a mighty warrior Messiah or king riding in on a spectacular horse accompanied by an army with any kind of chance of standing up to the Romans, Jesus rides in on an embarrassingly humble donkey, accompanied by a ragtag group of former fishermen, tax collectors, lepers and other outcasts and peasants. As church historian James Duke explains, "If *this* Jesus is the Messiah, many of the most popular and uplifting messianic expectations fall by the wayside. This is played out further as predictions of suffering and death told of beforehand follow thereafter.... Lordship, indeed even messianic lordship [and I would add, *especially* messianic lordship], is defined in terms of servanthood. Gentleness, humility, peaceableness, mercy, and self-giving acts of generosity and compassion are marks of God's domain."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey West, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 155.

<sup>2</sup> John Rollefson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 155.

<sup>3</sup> James O. Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 154.

Rev. Veronica Miles is a Baptist pastor and professor of homiletics at Wake Forest School of Divinity. She identifies one of the reasons this anti-triumphal event strikes such a deep chord for us. She writes, “‘Save us!’ they cry out, creating a royal carpet of coats, cloaks, and tree branches for this proclaimer of good news. ‘Save us!’ they shout, reminding us that the stain of division still permeates the fabric of our existence, thwarting our ability to live in peace and threatening our collective well-being. Almost instinctively, shouts of ‘Hosanna!’ escape our lips, and we join this triumphal march, augmenting our Lenten commitment to self-examination with reflection upon the quality of our lives together. For peace and reconciliation become possible when common folk with uncommon courage oppose exclusionary practices and policies and together stand with ‘the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”<sup>4</sup>

Miles goes on to recall many of those common folk throughout history who, while common as individuals, together, in community accomplished remarkable feats for the common good. Those involved in the Underground Railroad subverting the institution of slavery by helping people escape to freedom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the other members of the Confessing Church who openly opposed the Nazi Party declaring their loyalty to the Lordship of Christ and were martyred for their cause. Youths opposing apartheid in South Africa. Those who fought for civil rights in our own country’s past and those who continue to do so. Miles asserts, “We remember these stories and others so that we may find courage to march with Jesus and proclaim a word of peace and reconciliation, despite our location among the common folk. After all, Jesus’ followers possessed no formal authority to change their world, but neighbor and friend, stranger and distant traveler, children and adults marched into the city gates with Jesus to contest the exclusionary practices that had so long defined their existence.... Perhaps the fervor of the moment forecast a time when common folk standing on the side of justice would become a recurrent theme in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

But Palm Sunday’s prompting for us is not only about ordinary people doing extraordinary things to promote justice and healing for the Reign of God. Palm Sunday’s paradoxical collision of celebration in turmoil, of triumphal parade to persecution, of humble glory is for those of us ordinary people going through ordinary, extraordinary difficulties. For a church our size, there is a *lot* of heavy stuff going on right now. Too many loved ones dying. Too many loved ones fighting serious illness. Too many of us fighting serious illness. Too many facing major financial difficulties. Too many families in turmoil. Ordinary people facing problems that are ordinary in that they happen to people all the time, but extraordinary in terms of the toll they take on our lives. Not to mention the pain in our greater community. The families suffering in the wake of the recent double homicide. Families affected by drugs, violence, crime, unemployment, under-employment. Not to mention budget crises in our local, state and federal governments and the devastating cuts to education and social services for the most vulnerable in our communities. Not to mention the three wars our country is engaged in. Not to mention the wars and injustice, hunger and poverty throughout the world. Not to

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<sup>4</sup> Veronica Miles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 153.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 156

mention Japan's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster. Indeed, we are feeling the weight of a lot of turmoil.

There's no denying we are in a Lenten place. We are in a Passion place. And that is why the celebration of Palm Sunday is so vitally important. We need the opportunity to shout our Hosannas. We need the opportunity to cry out "save us! Help us! We pray!" We need the opportunity to remember that our Messiah, the only King that matters, is humble, gentle and leads us to peace. We need the opportunity to remember that our Messiah is one that turns everything around, even death into life. We need the opportunity to celebrate in the midst of turmoil. **Hosanna!**