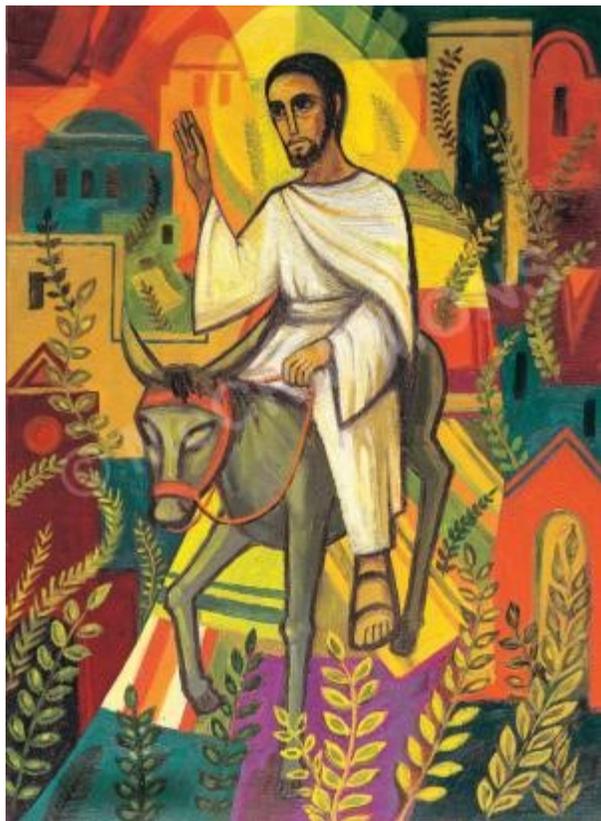


Palm-Passion
“Not Understanding Things at First”

Text: John 12:12-16

Preached: 3/22/18



I'm indebted to Sheldon Sorge – General Minister of Pittsburgh Presbytery, who helped me better understand Palm Sunday. Many of these words were originally his:

Yesterday hundreds of thousands of people across our country took part in protest marches against gun violence, even some from our own congregation. Still reeling from the carnage of last month's mass shooting in Parkland FL, young people across the country rallied together in a demonstration they called the "March for Our Lives," inviting all concerned adults to join them in demanding stricter gun controls. More than 800 events were planned across our nation and beyond. Whatever your position on gun control, it's hard to deny the persuasive power of a massive marching force.

In a few weeks, some of my colleagues from Pittsburgh Presbytery, including Sheldon Sorge, will be attending the Washington D.C. rally A.C.T. Now to End Racism, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Much of Dr. King's influence was galvanized in marches for racial justice, notably the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965, (the year I was born.)

Did you know there are many biblical stories of powerful mass marches, from Israel's march through the Red Sea to its march around the walls of Jericho, from David's massive procession of the ark into Jerusalem to annual parades of pilgrims ascending the holy mount to celebrate the Passover in the holy city. It is in this annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem that Jesus first begins to discover his Messianic identity.

Palm Sunday's parade is a protest march, make no mistake. People are fed up with the supporters of Roman tyranny. They cry for freedom, looking for a new leader to bring justice and peace into a society ruled by oppression and riven by strife.

The Gospels tell of the crowd milling around Jesus, shouting, "Hosanna!" – a Hebrew word inserted into the Greek text that means "Save us now!" It is a word of petition rather than praise, of demand rather than devotion. It is a protest against the status quo. It should not be reduced to some innocent, sweet praise-fest. No, like the myriad of students marching yesterday, this Palm Sunday crowd demanded change.

Palm Sunday people have had enough of things as they are. For them, justice delayed is justice denied. The time has come to turn the world upside down. Enough of the current order's repression and injustice!

Right in the middle of things we find Jesus – the instigator of Palm Sunday. The people want to make Jesus king, and he does not resist them. In fact, he orchestrated the rally, he had his disciples procure the donkey. He knows full-well in riding a colt instead of a muscled stallion, he offers himself as the sort of alternative “king” imagined by prophets, one whose rule rests in humility and divine appointment, rather than human force.

Make no mistake; the Palm Sunday parade is an act of defiance against unjust rule that defies the One who alone is to be worshiped and served. It is an act of resistance to human authorities flouting God’s decrees. Palm Sunday people have had enough of corrupt leadership, enough of those who claim to be promoting the welfare of their community while they harbor ultimate allegiance to their own interests.

Palm Sunday asks us, “Who’s in charge for us?” Palm Sunday demands an answer. Whom will we choose, this day, whom we will serve...whom we will follow?

Right after the Palm Sunday parade...do you know where Jesus is headed? The very next day, he marches right to the Temple and stages the ultimate protest demonstration against the powers that be – he will overturn the tables of the temple money-changers. Talk about “draining the swamp!”

Jesus knew full well that Sunday’s procession and Monday’s uproar would only accelerate his execution. Yet he pressed forward, knowing that only with his death could the new resurrection life of God’s reign burst forth for the healing of a broken world. He offered up his life because he considered our well-being more important than his own, and that pleasing his Father mattered more than saving his skin.

The disciples were caught up in the moment – they did not understand these things at first. Do we yet understand? When the palm is tied to the passion – then things become clearer. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.