

“Easy Rider”
April 10, 2022

Matthew 21:1-11

Every year I arrive at this particular Sunday needing to make a preaching choice. Do I preach about Palm Sunday as if it’s a standalone event? With all the drama and the fanfare surrounding Jesus riding into the holy city of Jerusalem on a donkey, should I focus exclusively on the Palm Sunday story this morning and save the events of Holy Week for a few days from now?

On the other hand, my church calendar tells me today is also known as Passion Sunday. In other words, today is the day we stand on the threshold of the Passion of Jesus Christ or the narrative that describes the final days and hours and events in the life of Jesus. Like a roller coaster that’s slowly inched its way up the initial slope, Passion Sunday marks the day when we’re about to plunge at breathtaking speed down the steep first incline. On a ride that will take us through the Last Supper, past the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot, into the Garden of Gethsemane where the disciples left Jesus to his own devices, under the watchful eye of the arresting Roman guards, beyond the death sentence of Pontius Pilate, up the hill on Golgotha. Until the Holy Week ride ends when Jesus takes his final breath on the cross.

So, is today a day for a Palm Sunday sermon or a day for a Passion Sunday sermon? I don’t think I can go wrong either way. Nevertheless, this morning I’m going to try and thread the needle by giving you a taste of Palm Sunday and a taste of Passion Sunday at the same time. And the way I’m going to do that is by inviting you to use your senses and imagine your way into this morning’s Bible story.

You have just heard the Palm Sunday story filled with sights and sounds and various plots and subplots. I’m hoping by the time I’m done preaching you’ll be able to place yourself somewhere in the Palm Sunday account through the eyes of the characters that make today’s story so vivid and colorful.

As a first step in this process, I realize that Peter/Michael just read this morning’s Scripture lesson, but I’m going to ask you to listen to the story as I read it again. You are welcome to close your eyes if it helps you to focus. While you are hearing the Palm Sunday story a second time, listen carefully to the details. Especially the person or the persons in the story that grab your attention. Is there a personality or a role or an emotion you identify with that helps you live into the narrative?

Read Matthew 21:1-11 again...

The four Gospel writers each have their own version of what happened on Palm Sunday. But as you listened to Matthew’s version of the story for the second time, what jumped out at you? More specifically for the purposes of this sermon, with whom did you connect?

Given the fact that Jesus sits at the center of today's story, he's probably the most likely focus of attention. As he was riding atop the donkey, Jesus knew the fierce opposition he would face once he entered through the city gates. Jesus knew the Roman authorities viewed him as the opposition and a threat to their power. Jesus knew the Jewish religious authorities resented him for openly flouting their religious laws and customs.

As a result, it's not that Jesus couldn't hear the crowds cheering on the roadside that day. He could. And it's not that Jesus didn't appreciate his disciple friends surrounding him like an entourage on all sides. He did. I just picture Jesus a little distracted. You and I know it's hard to focus on the moment at hand when your mind is already anticipating or dreading what lays ahead. Yes, Jesus was out on the road riding on the donkey. But I think his eyes were gazing into the distance. And his heart and his spirit were two or three steps past the road, trying to prepare himself, trying to steel himself, for the trauma he would soon endure...

If it's too hard to imagine yourself in the role of Jesus, do you picture yourself as one of the twelve disciples in the Palm Sunday story? They'd come so far with Jesus, traveling from one Galilean town to the next. At first, it was challenging for the disciples to leave their lives and routines behind in order to follow Jesus. But now here they were after three years of learning and adventure. Three years where their faith had been tested and their courage had been fortified. Three years when Jesus forced them to grow in wisdom and compassion.

As the disciples strode ever closer to Jerusalem alongside Jesus, can you sense the pride they would have felt in Jesus and in themselves? After all they had been through and all they had witnessed with Jesus as their leader, do you think they felt a certain sense of invulnerability? Believing they were firmly positioned on God's side and nothing could touch them and no one could possibly stand in their way. If Palm Sunday was a triumph for Jesus, surely it was just as much a triumph for his closest and dearest friends...

Then again, maybe you saw yourself as one of the spectators in the crowd that day. Always ready for a good, old-fashioned parade, you were out in the crowd with palm branches ready to wave. Perhaps your voice was getting a little raspy because you shouted "Hosanna" too many times. Still, it didn't matter how hot or how dusty it was outside that day or how long you had to stand around and wait until Jesus showed up, it was all worth it to see him pass in front of you.

And how great would it be for you and your family and friends when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Like everyone else out on the road, you suffered under Roman rule. The Romans taxed you and harassed you and made it clear day that they were the ones with the power while you had to toe their line. Yet when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, you were convinced he would take over the throne and become the new king.

Your expectations were sky high that day. Exceeded only by a sense of excitement that your dream scenario was about to come to pass.

Jesus was moved by the Palm Sunday crowd but his mind was wandering. The disciples were filled with a sense of joy and accomplishment, which they assumed was only going to build in the days to come. The crowds were part of a tale they hoped to someday tell their grandchildren of the time when they witnessed Jesus enter Jerusalem and life as they knew it would never be the same.

Meanwhile, the Roman soldiers and government officials lay in wait inside Jerusalem, ready to ambush Jesus. The religious authorities were gathered together somewhere inside Jerusalem, busily building their case against Jesus for the moment Jesus would face the music and be held accountable for his transgressions.

Who's left in the Palm Sunday narrative? Is there anybody else in the story that captured your imagination?

Here's one I didn't think about until just a couple of weeks ago. How about the donkey? Did anybody here identify with the donkey? The donkey that plodded along with Jesus on top. Do you think the donkey was a bit confused by the swirl of adulation? Do you think the donkey was at all scared, on account of the noise and the chaos and the palpable energy rippling through the crowd? Not to mention all those palm branches waving indiscriminately in front of the donkey's face like a car going through an automated car wash.

I wonder what it was like for the donkey on Palm Sunday? When Jesus was strolling by and the crowd reaction reached fever pitch, I can picture Jesus gently resting his hand on the donkey's mane and neck. And then leaning over and offering a few quiet words of reassurance in the donkey's ear. "It's going to be okay," Jesus whispered. "It's gonna be okay."

All the donkey needed in that moment was someone to offer a few compassionate, comforting words. And as soon as Jesus leaned over and whispered, the donkey knew the kind of person Jesus was. Even more than that, the donkey knew they would be willing to carry Jesus as far as Jesus wanted...through Jerusalem and beyond...

There are a number of different messages we will hear in church over the course of this upcoming week. But I want to lift up one message this morning, courtesy of the Palm Sunday donkey, that's worth pondering right now and every day through Easter.

Are you and I willing to carry the message of Jesus' love and compassion and justice with us through the gates of the city of Jerusalem? When we gather around Christ's table on Maundy Thursday, breaking bread and drinking from the cup, will we remember the love and compassion and justice of Jesus in our hearts?

On Good Friday, when we witness Jesus take his last breath on the cross, can you and I hang in there with Jesus and hold on tightly to his message of love and justice and compassion? And when Easter dawns and all of us gather next Sunday to celebrate the joy of the resurrection, will we proclaim the love and compassion and justice of Jesus Christ to one another and to a world that needs to hear God's promise of salvation?

Friends, when all is said and done, wherever you found yourself in this morning's Palm or Passion Sunday story, accompany Jesus well as we live these next holy days. The ride that will unfold this week is only just beginning. And it's about to get bumpy... Amen.

