

A sermon preached on Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025  
 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT  
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Matthew 21:1-11    Luke 22:1-49

Did you ever notice that neither Palm Sunday nor Good Friday worked out the way most people thought they would? Often our very best wisdom and expectations, like weather reports, turn out to be wrong.

A spiritual mentor of mine thought he was healthy. He exercised regularly and ate a reasonably healthy diet, but his doctor had some concerns and asked him to take a stress test. A nuclear stress test pushes or stresses the heart, then takes pictures of the heart to see how it is responding. The stress test revealed that there were major problems with my mentor's heart that needed to be addressed immediately because his life was in danger. It was a shocking and depressing experience for him, but he learned from it, changed his lifestyle, and lived many more years helping others learn from his experience. God helped him work through the depressing stress test to discover greater physical and spiritual health.

In many ways, Palm Sunday and Good Friday were stress tests of spiritual health for Jesus, for his followers, for the religious leaders, for ordinary people who were watching and for the Roman Government. How would they all respond in these stressful situations? And how would God respond in these stressful situations?

Right now our Nation is going through a stress test. We all are watching and God is watching. Are the decisions and actions of our current government and the responses of all of us as ordinary people, faithful to the founding documents, laws and values of the people in this country? Are they working for the common good of all in this nation and the world? If not, what needs to be changed to restore the health of this Nation?

As people of faith, we are also experiencing a stress test of our spiritual lives. Micah summarized the Biblical prophets when he said: "What does the Lord require of you? 'Act justly, love kindness or mercy, and walk humbly with God.'" (Micah 6:8). As a practicing Jew, Jesus consistently taught that God created human beings to love God and all our neighbors, and especially those in need who were not being treated justly. During this stressful time of testing, might you or I be called by God, like prophets and ordinary people down through the centuries were called by God, to speak and act in small or large ways on behalf of our neighbors in need, seeking justice, and mercy while we walk humbly with God? These are very uncomfortable, difficult questions we need to be talking and praying about together at this time of spiritual stress testing.

So let's explore what God might want to say to us through the ways people responded to the stress tests of the Palm Sunday and Good Friday Gospels.

The Palm Sunday crowd was excited to walk alongside Jesus, waving palm branches and singing Psalms of praise to God. The Psalm they sang as they walked was Psalm 118 which they always sang as they walked to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven." This was a Psalm crying out for God's help. Hosanna is not just a word of praise, like the word Alleluia. Hosanna is the combination of two Aramaic words that meant "Save us".

This cry of “hosanna, save us/help us”... expressed the longing hopes of that first Palm Sunday crowd of people who were fearful and exhausted by the occupation of the Roman Army and government, feeling like foreigners in their own country and feeling helpless to improve their daily lives because of the powerful control of the Roman Empire. So their cry of Hosanna was both their traditional liturgical song and also the wail of their hearts...O God save us from this nightmare way of life! They longed for God to change their situation.

I wonder, what is the longing cry of your heart this morning? All of us carry our own struggles and our concerns about loved ones, about our nation and world. We are invited to join the Palm Sunday crowd and bring the longing cries of our hearts to Jesus here this morning.

For that first Palm Sunday crowd, there was something dramatically different about their Passover walk into Jerusalem this year. What was different was they were walking alongside Jesus.

Some in this group of walkers were beginning to think that Jesus might be God’s Messiah, the one God promised to send to bring freedom from Rome. They pictured Jesus defeating the powerful Romans, taking control, and making Israel great again, ruling not only in their country, but over the whole world as God’s Messiah. Israel would once again become a rich and powerful world empire, like when David and Solomon were their kings. As they cried out “Hosanna, God save us”, they were meaning, now is the time, Jesus. Come save us from the oppression of the Romans.

So that first Palm Sunday procession of ordinary people was a risky walk, with potential political implications for them. The Romans could come and arrest them for disturbing the peace. Yet those walkers risked publicly demonstrating their hope that God would work through Jesus to be their spiritual and political Savior. Curiously, on that walk, Jesus looked very ordinary, riding a common donkey. He did not look like the all-powerful Messiah they longed for. And, while Matthew tells us it was a large crowd, the Palm Sunday procession was probably not very large, otherwise the Romans would have arrested or dispersed them.

By contrast, that year, like on every Passover, Pilate, the Roman Governor would march into Jerusalem from the north, riding on a huge war horse, in full military regalia, surrounded by a legion of 3,000 Roman soldiers wearing red and gold armor, marching in lock step as they entered the city gates. It was a huge military parade designed to intimidate the local population.

Imagine Roman soldiers marching with swords and spears vs. ordinary folks walking softly and singing Psalms with joy; Roman power and arrogance vs. the humility and simplicity of Jesus and the palm waving crowd. What a contrast.

As we just read Luke’s report of Good Friday, we could see and feel how the hopes and dreams of the Palm Sunday crowd were crushed just five days later, as Jesus was nailed to the cross. They expected victory. What they experienced at the cross felt like total defeat, dragging them into despair. Instead of Jesus defeating the Romans, the Romans had crucified Jesus. Life did not turn out as they hoped and expected. It was a stress test of their trust in Jesus and a stress test of the ordinary people who cried out, Crucify him, and a public stress test of the values of the Roman Empire

And yet, by Sunday, in ways no one could have imagined, they would begin to discover that on the other side of the dead end of the cross and tomb, Jesus had risen and a whole new life for him, for them, for the whole world was emerging.

What might God want to teach you and me this morning through the stress tests experienced by the Palm Sunday crowd and the Good Friday crowd?

Both gospels remind us that often we do not see life as God sees it. From our human perspective God has a way of taking what we think is success and revealing its emptiness. And God takes what looks like failure and turns it into a redemptive pathway to new life.

Perhaps all this tells us something about what God is like. God is humble and often comes to us in the disguise of our ordinary lives. Like the Palm Sunday crowd, we often ask and expect God to come like a powerful Roman military general to take control of the world and make everything right according to our standards. But God comes as a vulnerable baby in a manger, God comes riding on a small donkey surrounded by a rag tag group of ordinary people waving palms, and God comes as what appears to be an ordinary man crucified on a cross by the powerful injustice of the Romans. God meets us and eventually surprises us in our darkest Good Friday seasons.

The palm waving crowd might remind us this morning that we never know how our greatest hopes and expectations of God and life will turn out. Like them, all of us are vulnerable to our limited knowledge and to life's surprises.

The Good Friday crowd might remind us that our worst fears are never the end of the story. God works in mysterious and powerful ways to overcome the worst that evil, sin and death can do in our lives and in the world around us. What appears to our human eyes and understanding to be a hopeless dead-end situation may actually be a time of transition, a time of God's new beginnings on the other side of the death.

The people who were there on Palm Sunday and Good Friday might also tell us that they regretted many of their responses in those situations. They eventually recognized and grieved over their misunderstandings and lack of faithfulness, their betrayals, denials, and abandonment of Jesus. Yet they would be eager to tell us how the radical forgiveness and continuing loving presence of Jesus with them helped them learn and grow from their failures during these stressful situations.

As we all muddle through the stress test of this time in our lives, those Palm Sunday and Good Friday folks might be quick to remind us that, even in our fears and anxieties, even when we say and do things we wish we had not done, or don't do what we wish we had done, Christ is with us always, overflowing with love and forgiveness and eager to help us keep learning and growing as healthy, faithful followers of Jesus.

I invite you to close your eyes for a few moments, and in the silence of our hearts let us talk with Jesus...

With gentle awareness of how you've been responding to the spiritual stress test of this time in our nation...and aware of what you have learned from the Palm Sunday and Good Friday crowds this morning, what little changes might Jesus be inviting you to make in some of your attitudes and perspectives, and some of your words and actions this week?