

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Palm Sunday, Mark 1:1-11, 3/28/2021 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Normally this Sunday is Palm and Passion Sunday. The Episcopal church doesn't trust us to go to all of the Holy Week services in our prayer book, so on what used to be Palm Sunday we now have The Sunday of The Passion colon Palm Sunday, and we read the entire passion story, so that everyone will hear it before Easter Sunday. Otherwise, the reasoning goes, we would just go from party to party, Sunday to Sunday, and miss the arrest and the crucifixion. The death. The grave. This combination liturgy makes Palm and Passion Sunday one of the hardest Sundays of the year to preach because not only do we have the liturgy of the palms, but then we have the entire passion narrative, and the preacher has to figure out what piece to emphasize: the cock crowing? The kiss of Judas? Pontius Pilate acquiescing to the crowd even though he knew Jesus had not done anything evil? Or, should the preacher try to preach on the whole entire story, creating an extra-long service on a Sunday which is already extra long because it includes the entire passion?

Every year the preacher has to figure how to preach from this huge story—except this year. We are reopened for the first time since December, and we are trying to keep the service to under an hour, so we are not reading the passion narrative as we normally do. We also are not reading it on Good Friday as we normally do. We are urging you to follow the Zoom link from the eNews and listen to the passion narrative read at 11:30 today by members of our adult forum community.

So here I am on Palm Sunday, able to preach about just that day. That day when only Jesus knew that he was days away from death. The day we often call the triumphal entry.

But, we are using the Palm Sunday reading from the Gospel of Mark. We didn't process with palms like we normally do, starting outside, even one year when it snowed later in the day and I felt awful because I had insisted that we begin outdoors and everyone said it was too cold and I said I didn't care; and then it snowed. This year, we aren't able to do that movement. We have just reopened, so we put the palms on your preselected, socially distanced seats.

But Mark's Gospel doesn't actually mention palms, as you can see if you check the reading. There's a colt, and they put cloaks on it presumably because there wasn't a saddle, and many people spread their cloaks out in the road, along with some leafy branches. But only John's Gospel actually has palms.

Does this matter? Not really. We've talked before about how each Gospel was written for a different audience, so each emphasizes different things. But since this should be the only year that we only have the triumphal entry in our liturgy without the passion reading, I want to look at the particularities of Mark's Gospel to see what the Spirit might be saying to us through that reading in this unique year.

The so-called triumphal entry seems a lot less triumphal without palms, and Mark's Palm Sunday Gospel is the least triumphal of any such entries in the Gospels, in my opinion.

Matthew's Palm Sunday Gospel ends with "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

John's closes with "His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."

In Luke, Jesus tells the Pharisees, "I tell you, if these were silent, then the stones would shout out."

In Mark, Jesus entered Jerusalem, went into the temple, looked around, and then went on to Bethany with his disciples because it was late.

Nothing about triumph or prophecy or glory or shouting stones. Nope. Just, Jesus looked around and then left because it was late.

Honestly, I never really paid much attention to this, because on Palm Sunday I've always tried to figure out what part of the passion I was going to preach about. I never thought much about Jesus *looking around*. And I'm surprised that the Gospel that shows him looking around is Mark, the Gospel whose favorite word is typically "immediately." We even had two immediates in today's Gospel. Mark is always in a hurry, yet in his Gospel, Jesus took some time to look around.

He looked around, and then the next day Jesus entered the temple and threw out those who were selling and knocked over tables and ranted about God's house becoming a den of robbers. Realizing that he looked around first makes me feel better about that whole incident. He didn't just fly into a rage on a whim. He scoped it out, had the whole night to ruminate, and then took action the next day.

What about you? Do you look around? Maybe you look around too much and fail to take any action. Or maybe you rush into a situation when you would be better served spending some time looking around. Linger.

Jesus looks around and drinks it all in: the doves, the currency exchange. The crookedness and irreverence of a place that was supposed to be a house of prayer.

Maybe he was caught up in the glory of that enormous building. Maybe it made him feel small and close to God at the same time. Maybe Jesus felt swept away when he looked around the temple and that's why the next day he had such a bad reaction to the busy-ness in a place reserved for prayer and worship.

This pandemic may feel like it has given us too much time to look around, but as we ease into Holy Week, I encourage us to take the time to look around like Jesus did. To immerse ourselves slowly into this holiest of weeks. To savor our last taste of the Eucharist on Maundy Thursday, before focusing on the grave on Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

Don't leap ahead to Easter without looking around. Linger. What did Jesus see on that first Palm Sunday? Look around. What do you see today that you have not seen in other years?