

**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

4 The Lord God gave me an educated tongue  
to know how to respond to the weary  
with a word that will awaken them in the morning.[a]  
God awakens my ear in the morning to listen,  
as educated people do.

5 The Lord God opened my ear;  
I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back.

6 Instead, I gave my body to attackers,  
and my cheeks to beard pluckers.  
I didn't hide my face  
from insults and spitting.

7 The Lord God will help me;  
therefore, I haven't been insulted.  
Therefore, I set my face like flint,  
and knew I wouldn't be ashamed.

8 The one who will declare me innocent is near.  
Who will argue with me?  
Let's stand up together.  
Who will bring judgment against me?  
Let him approach me.

9 Look! The Lord God will help me.  
Who will condemn me?  
Look, they will wear out like clothing;  
the moth will eat them.

**Philippians 2:5-11**

6 Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

7 But he emptied himself  
by taking the form of a slave  
and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,

8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore, God highly honored him  
and gave him a name above all names,

10 so that at the name of Jesus everyone  
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow

11 and every tongue confess that  
Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

## **Sermon**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:  
Amen.

So, it's Palm Sunday, and we haven't read the Palm Sunday Gospel yet. No one's talked about Jesus on donkey or cutting down foliage or taking off their clothes. Can we even have a sermon at this point? There's no need to worry, because we'll parade out of the sanctuary and into the memorial garden, palms in hand, as a part of our Blessing of the Palms with our siblings in Christ from Grace Episcopal and Radford Presbyterian. We'll even sing all Glory Laud and Honor together as we walk out to the Memorial Garden. What we have now, though, are readings from Isaiah and Philippians, and they point us to the tension that we live on Palm Sunday. We waive our palms, we sing our songs, we crown our king with many crowns, but a continuous reminder of

caution replays in our readings, and hopefully, in our minds as well. Though certainly a king, no one wants to wear the coming crown of thorns. Though certainly a savior, no one wants to save in this gruesome way of Good Friday. Yes, a conqueror, but one who conquers death not with power or violence, but instead submitting to the worst violence that the powers of the world have to offer. God conquers death by entering death. There's celebrating today, but suffering's on its way.

You might know that there's many theories of preaching that pastors are taught in seminary. There's many different ways to form a sermon or to think about the sermon's goal, but I don't recall ever telling you explicitly what guides most of my sermons. So, I want to make clear what I think about when I preach, especially today, because we're entering a week with a lot of sermons. In this theory I've adopted, there's two questions every sermon should answer: What do you want people to know? What

do you want people to do? Whenever I write a sermon, I'm always thinking about what do I want you to know and what do I want you to do. Of course, since they're sermons, God exists at the core of each question. When I use examples, tell stories, present poetry, all of these devices, my chief goal isn't to have you know about them, but instead, to use them to help everyone know something about God, and especially, to know something about how God's at work in your world, about God's activity in your life. Similarly, when I encourage you to act, it's not first about raising the visibility of this church or making us feel good, but about learning to do God's will in the world. It's about learning to reflect God's eternal kingdom in our immediate context. So, on this Palm Sunday, there's two things to think about: what's the main point about God and how should I act in response to that knowledge? Listen as we continue for the answers to these questions.

We tend to get fixated on a number of things other than Jesus on Palm Sunday. Some love to talk about the palms themselves, and the cloaks that people strew on the ground, as they offer signs of reverence. It's this kind of stuff that's the origin of rolling out the red carpet, that it's such an important event that these people shouldn't have to walk on the ground like us peons. No! They need a special carpet, and this one's a special blend of loosely leaves and coats. But what does that mean about Jesus? Or we get fixated on the donkey, which we remember that the prophet Zechariah foretold, "Look, your king will come to you. He is righteous and victorious. He is humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the offspring of a donkey." He's clearly riding the right animal. It's a good thing Jesus didn't show up on a camel. But what does that mean about Jesus? In other words, too often on Palm Sunday, we get caught up in the pageantry, with loud shouts of Hosanna,

and even breathe a deep sigh of relief. Ahhh. Everything's going to be alright. This Jesus guy is king, after all.

And of course, for us, it will be alright. There's certainly something to celebrate. The Messiah's here. And the consequences of that, we already know. Neither the powers of Rome, or the weight of sin, or the influence of religious tradition, or any of the other authorities that like to keep the status quo of danger and fear and oppression, none of them can prevent God's victory in this Jesus, who rides on a donkey that walks on our jackets and these branches. For us, the consequences of Palm Sunday are life, life abundant, resurrection.

But the problem really is we'd rather stay on Palm Sunday. We're fixated here because this is the part of Holy Week that's exciting, that feels good. This is the part of Holy Week where we get to ignore death. For God, though, the consequences of Palm Sunday are much more severe. What begins as a celebration ends

in a crucifixion. This vibrant Sunday parade becomes a gruesome, tragic Friday charade of pageantry into death.

You see, when on Palm Sunday people cried for Jesus to become King, they cried for a temporal ruler. They were tired of Herod and Pilate exploiting them. They were tired of Rome's military might squeezing them. They wanted a revolutionary who would overthrow Caesar's armies, depose Pilate, and replace Herod as the true King of Israel. They wanted King David writ large, a restoration of Israel's dynasty of Hebrew political power. But after Palm Sunday, it becomes clear Jesus hasn't brought any armies, nor is he enlisting soldiers. He's still healing people with miraculous power. He's still focused on the world's transformation, but he's also still teaching about peace. Jesus doesn't seem at all intending to take immediate military action, on alleviating our suffering exactly the way we want him to, so the same people who

wave palms for him today cry out “crucify him!” on Good Friday. So we, who cry out **hosanna** today, cry out **crucify him** on Friday.

To answer that first question, then, what I want you to know about the Lord is this: God knew full well on Palm Sunday what was coming on Maundy Thursday in the betrayal by one of Jesus’s very best friends, that on Good Friday death was imminent, that by Holy Saturday he’d be descended to the dead. While we fixate on the pomp and circumstance of Palm Sunday, God focuses on the whole process of salvation. God knew full well on Sunday what was coming on Good Friday, when another beloved friend would deny evening knowing Jesus before his own people cried for his crucifixion and the Romans would guarantee his death with iron nails into that tree of life.

That the story doesn’t end on Palm Sunday is the Gospel. God’s love for us carries Jesus from the exaltation of the crowds to the cruel crucifixion called for by the very same crowd. Rather than



force us to deal with our sin on our own - and if this Holy Week Journey of Jesus's reveals anything about us, it's that we're incredibly fickle in our sinful desires - Jesus continued the path from Palm Sunday to face our sin in Pilate's eyes and Herod's questions. God followed through with the prophecy in Isaiah, for Jesus didn't rebel, didn't turn back, gave his body to attackers, cheeks to beard pluckers. Jesus didn't hide his face from insults and spitting, and didn't scorn death, all because it was through death's door that creation's redemption and restoration could be found. Jesus was rescuing us from oppression all along, just not in the way we anticipated.

So what do we do with that, then? How should that transform our lives? For that's really the meaning of the second question. It's not just simply about changing a behavior, but about instigating lasting change in our lives. How can this knowledge of God's

relentless love for us, a love that's not stuck on Palm Sunday but perseveres through the grave, how can that love change us?

Most of us have heard an authority figure, either in jest or perhaps quite seriously, tell us, "do as I say and not as I do," or some version of that truism. One of the things we can trust with God is that God's not satisfied with hypocritical leadership, but instead leads by example. God does as God says, and invites us to become, in the words of James, "doers of the Word." God tells us that humility is the path of life, and then in Jesus God lives the most radical form of humility: self sacrifice. Jesus lives a life not satisfied with personal accolades, but follows the higher path of selflessness. Jesus allows love for others to reshape his entire life, and is willing to do whatever it takes for us to enter God's presence, even if it means suffering death. The love of God isn't just a love that comes to us in theoretical words, but a love that proves itself in concrete actions.

In that way, Palm Sunday stands as a harbinger, a reminder, of God's ultimate humility. Even when we would heap simple praise upon God, Jesus is willing to take the complex road toward Golgotha. Rather than pursue the glory, laud, and honor, rather than seek elevation, Jesus instead lowered himself in order to raise others up. Even when Jesus deserved our praise, Jesus decided our presence in eternity was more important than receive our accolades. So he journeyed on from Palm Sunday to face a death that didn't belong to him.

What should this knowledge inspire us to do? It should inspire us to first give thanks. On Palm Sunday, we expect a king like any other, one satisfied with a big ego and a high approval rating, but God's not satisfied with that. God's satisfaction isn't complete until our redemption is accomplished. That's a reason to give thanks in worship, to give thanks in prayer, to lead a more thankful life. God's selflessness in Holy Week should inspire within

us a response of constant thanks. There's lots more we could say about this - to be more selfless, to follow Christ's example of humility, to live self-sacrificial lives - but the reminder of Holy Week is that God's the only one who consistently embodies these traits. God entered Holy Week because we failed to recognize the vitality of humility, and instead embraced with lust the temptations of pride and prejudice. We made ourselves God's enemies through sin and Christ still died for us. If we simply learn thankfulness for God's selflessness, if we can recognize the lengths of love to which God goes to secure our relationship, only then we just might start to reflect the humility of that God. If we're thankful for the God we're with, we might start to look like the God we're thankful for.

Amen.