

Matthew 21:1–9
Palm Sunday
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
April 2, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Another name for Palm Sunday is Passion Sunday. These two names, Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, reflect two different traditions in the church, both of which you experienced this morning. First, there's the procession with palm branches, which goes back to 4th century Jerusalem. It was introduced into the western church in the 9th century when pilgrims to the Holy Land brought the custom home from their travels. The second tradition is the reading of St. Matthew's account of our Lord's passion, the account of Christ's suffering and death. The tradition of reading the passion account according to St. Matthew is included in the oldest liturgies of the western church.

Today both traditions live on. They work together to show the contrasting character of this day. On the one hand, we have Christ entering Jerusalem, welcomed as the king of Israel with the waving of palm branches. On the other hand, we have Christ betrayed, suffering, crucified, and buried: the passion of Christ, "passion" from the Latin meaning, "to suffer." There's the King of the Jews entering Jerusalem, and then there's the King of the Jews hanging on the cross. The king who enters Jerusalem on a donkey, like King Solomon, and the king who is crowned with thorns. Two contrasting ideas of what a king looks like, but the same king: our Lord Jesus Christ.

The crowds went out to greet Jesus because they heard He had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 12:17–18). Surely someone with such power could establish an eternal kingdom here

on earth. That's also why the chief priests and Pharisees sought to kill Jesus. If everyone followed Jesus, they thought, the Romans would come and destroy everything and everyone (John 11:48). That's when Caiaphas, the High Priest, prophetically said: "it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (John 11:50–51). Plans began coming together to put Jesus to death (John 11:53), the worst kind of conspiracy: the kings of the earth setting themselves up and the rulers taking counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed" (Ps 2).

The crowds welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as a king, but they could not understand what was actually going on. They sought a king who could drive out the Romans and re-establish a glorious earthly kingdom. But Jesus's Kingdom is not of this world, even if it is in this world (John 18:36). The Kingdom of God must come in God's way and at God's time, in a way people might not expect. It is through many tribulations that we must enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22), and that's exactly how Jesus would bring about His Kingdom during Holy Week. The glorious Kingdom of God would come by way of suffering and the cross.

The people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as a king, but later that week our Lord would be mocked for His kingship. Soldiers mockingly dressed our Lord in purple, as a king, and placed a crown of thorns on His head. They put the charge against our Lord on the cross: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt 27:37). The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people mocked our dying Lord, saying: "He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe Him" (Matt 27:42). The crowds welcomed Jesus as their king, but they didn't understand the nature of His Kingdom. Instead, they made a mockery of the King of kings.

Like the people welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, so too, do we welcome Jesus, with loud hosannas. But do we really know what we're getting ourselves into? Do we know what we are in for when we follow this king and not another? Perhaps not. Perhaps we believe Jesus will give us an easier life, or at least a way to cope. We hope Jesus will help us get what we want. Or we welcome him because that's what the crowd is doing. Like the people in Jerusalem, we think Jesus is here on our terms. We want a god made in our own image.

But Jesus is not here to give us an easier life or a way to cope. Instead, He says: "whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:38). Jesus is not here to give us what we want. Instead, He says: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24). Jesus is not here to make us fit in with the crowd. Instead, He says: "you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt 10:22). Jesus did not come to make your life easier, to give you what you think you want, or to make you fit in. Jesus entered Jerusalem, Jesus entered our world, to give us what we truly need: to take our sins and offenses upon Himself and to die on the cross in our place. Jesus came to do the will of God the Father, which led Him by way of suffering and the cross to enter into His glory. It is only in this way that we can find true joy, true life, as Jesus says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

It's in the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross that our burden is removed, where God gives us all good things, and where we become part of a real community. But it's on God's terms, not ours. Through Baptism, our Lord's life becomes our life, a life of self-denial and suffering. We reflect on this during the season of Lent and especially now during Holy Week. By seeing what our Savior has done for us, we learn to mortify our flesh, to drown the old Adam,

and to kill our sinful desires. We learn that the Christian life is a lonely way, a way of denial, the way of the cross.

The crowds were mistaken when they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as their king. They were mistaken about what the Kingdom of God looks like. Jesus does not come on our terms; He does not even come on His own terms. Jesus does the will of the Father, and the will of the Father is that suffering and the cross should come before glory (Luke 24:26). The passion, or the suffering, of Christ comes before the joy of Easter. And so it is in the Christian life as well. In self-denial we imitate our Lord in his suffering and death, following Him wherever He leads. By the grace of God we endure to the end, knowing that whoever suffers with Christ here will be glorified with Him there. Then we will join those in the New Jerusalem, as pictured in the Book of Revelation, that great multitude no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the lamb!’” (Rev 7:9-10). This Holy Week, let us take up our cross and follow our king into Jerusalem to die, in order that we too may be raised with Him to live in His kingdom forever. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.