

## Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024 First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, WI

### SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 11:1-1

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this: 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it.

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

### INVOCATION

**All: Merciful God, as we enter Holy Week, and gather in your house of prayer, turn our hearts once again to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. May we recognize your presence as we remember these events of defeat and victory; of humiliation and exultation. We give you thanks for this day of celebration and ask your blessing on all of us and on these palms that they may be symbols that Christ has come and that Christ will come again. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.**

**Hosanna! Come, Jesus, Come! Amen.**

MESSAGE *"Something to Celebrate...and It's More Than Palms!"*

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

**Please pray with me: Great and gracious God, we pray that the words that we hear, the thoughts that we form, and the meditations of our hearts will be pleasing to you, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter. Amen**

There was a great deal of joy on that Sunday which we have known as *Palm Sunday*. It is the beginning of the last week in the life of Jesus Christ. So, we have come into this place, re-enacting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and remembering those last days of Jesus earthly life...calling them "holy." During this HOLY WEEK, the mood will change quickly:

The great joy on Palm Sunday changes to deep anger as Jesus drives the money changers out of the Temple. The somber moments in the Upper Room, are followed by a time of agony in the garden of Gethsemane and the terrible hours of Good Friday. On the day *we call* Easter Sunday, deep grief will turn to joy as we, with the women at the tomb, realize, breathless, that Jesus has risen... just as he said he would. We pass through these days not because of some holy habit or tradition, and not only because our faith makes us think...once a year... about the blood that Jesus shed for us or about the stone that was rolled away from the tomb.

We relive these stories because each time we do, we know they are more than special effects to touch our spirits. The stories of Holy Week are living messages for us...the basics of our salvation and our assurance of the promise of eternal life.

We begin today with Jesus getting the "red carpet" treatment (or I should say "green carpet..." with palms!) as he passes through Jerusalem. His reputation has preceded him. While he had spent most of his time in the

region of Galilee, word had spread of his unique ministry. He had frequently drawn a crowd around him in the city or the countryside. Shortly before this entrance into Jerusalem, he had raised Lazarus from the dead and that word got around! People wanted to see him, to touch him and to welcome him.

Some were excited because of his healing power. Some had heard about him speaking in mysterious parables and they liked what they heard. Some were curious because he was very different from anyone they had ever met: Jesus loved them in a way they had never before experienced. Some were convinced that he was the promised Messiah.

There was something about him... In a cruel and violent world, where most people were interested in basic survival, Jesus regularly stirred up enough trouble to risk his own safety. In a culture where people shamelessly promoted themselves, Jesus told those he healed to "tell no one." He was not swayed by current trends. He was not concerned with money. He had no problem challenging those in power.

Some found him exciting because they thought he would take the place of David, the great warrior King of a thousand years before. They were tired of Roman domination and wanted to be free from the Roman soldiers, Roman taxes and wanted a new King of their own.

**There was something to celebrate that day.** As Jesus passed through the city that had known so much sorrow and bloodshed, the people who had gathered for the Passover this year were experiencing great joy and hope for the future.

Some who lined the streets that day were the eye-witnesses who were there when Jesus performed miracles, who noticed that he hung out with the lame and the sick, the outsiders, outcasts and outlaws...he rejected no one. Some had only heard of Jesus and they, too, were pushing through the crowd to get a glimpse of him.

Put yourself in their place...

- you may have heard Jesus talking to Zaccheus, saying: "Today Salvation has come to this house. For today, the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."
- You may have been there when Jesus cured the blind man, saying: "Your faith has saved you."
- It may have been *your child* that Jesus leaned down to bless saying, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child... will never enter it."
- Or was it you who heard the story of the prodigal son coming down the road and you can't forget the father's words: "...this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."
- You might have been the one Jesus was talking to when he said: "Unless you repent, you will perish."
- *You* are remembering Jesus saying: "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen."

**You also were shouting,** "Hosanna to the King!"

The people in the streets that day had no idea what would follow in the coming days...we know that those were the days that shaped our faith and the faith of millions for over 2000 years.

We gather today, not to review our 2000-year-old heritage but, to live it, to renew it and to make it personal. We will take these palm branches home with us to celebrate what this day means to us: that Jesus has come to make all things new. "Hosanna" is our cry, too.

The palms were then, as they are for us now, a traditional part of this day... but they are not the whole story:

The donkey awakened, his mind still savoring the afterglow of the most exciting day of his life. Never before, had he felt such a rush of pleasure and pride.

He walked into town and found a group of people by the well. "I'll show myself to them," he thought.

But they didn't notice him. They went on drawing their water and paid him no attention. "Throw your garments down," he said crossly.

"Don't you know who I am?"

They just looked at him in amazement. Someone slapped him across the tail and ordered him to move. "Miserable heathens!" he muttered, "I'll just go to the market where the good people are. They will remember me."

But the same thing happened. No one paid any attention to the donkey as he strutted down the main street in front of the market- place.

"The palm branches! Where are the palm branches!" he shouted.

"Yesterday, you threw palm branches!"

Hurt and confused, the donkey returned home to his mother.

"Foolish child," she said gently. "Don't you realize that without him, you are just an ordinary donkey?"

**Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks by Wayne Rice. Copyright 1994 by Youth Specialties, Inc.**

We, too, are foolish if we think that today is just about palms. Today is about us ordinary people being most fulfilled when we are in the service of Jesus Christ. This day is about God's plan to redeem the world and about how *we are key players* in that plan.

"Hosanna" is the cry of our scripture today...translated, it means, "Save Us!" It is a cry for help, a shout of hope as we raise our voices in joyful praise. The story of this Holy Week continues in the lives of people like you and me in whom the living Christ continues to work wonders. Jesus has come down the streets of our cities, and is among us right here and right now.

**That's something to celebrate! Take a deep breath. And let it out.  
Thanks be to God!**

#### **BENEDICTION**

As this time of worship comes to an end, we step into this holiest of weeks. Be in the upper room and experience the meal. Stand in the shadow of the cross and hear the last words of Jesus...Gather at the empty tomb...and never stop celebrating what Jesus has done for us!

So then, go, knowing wherever we are on our life's journey we are held together in the palm of God's hand. May our God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter bless us. Amen.