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Sermon 28 March 2021

Title: Passover, Palms, and Passion

- Good morning church! God is still on the throne—guiding us, providing for us and presiding over us this morning, amen? We are glad you’re with us this morning. It is a great day to worship together.
- Today is Palm Sunday-- a day when we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and the waving of the palm branches by the adoring crowds who shouted “Hosanna”—“Save us! Blessed is the name of the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel.”
- Today also marks the beginning of Holy Week-- the week when we remember the days leading up to the crucifixion and burial of Jesus on Friday, we call to mind the dark day of waiting on Holy Saturday, the anxiety and the confusion that Jesus’ followers felt—the grief and the sorrow and the disappointment—but the story doesn’t end there—next Sunday we celebrate the glorious surprise that the disciples found on Easter morning when they discovered that the tomb was empty—Jesus was not there—he had risen—he had risen indeed!
- But we are not there yet. For the past few Sundays in Lent we have been looking to the lectionary for our scriptures, and as we have journeyed toward Holy Week we have been taking the time to meditate on the mystery of the incarnation— we have been, and today we still are, for one more Sunday, taking time to walk the road that leads to the cross.

- Today is Palm Sunday. But today is also Passion Sunday—a day when we recall the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus—the humiliation, the torture and gruesome public execution by the powers-that-be—a day when we try, as we will for the next 6 days, to understand the depth of what it means that Jesus did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself NOTHING—EVEN to death on a cross.
- And so we refer to this day as Palm/Passion Sunday. And that slash between the two terms is a good reminder that the events of Palm Sunday are best viewed through the lens of the Passion—that the triumphal entry and the shouts of the crowd cannot be understood fully until after the crucifixion and resurrection. John’s gospel tell us that this was the case for Jesus’ disciples in Chapter 12 verse 16, where John writes, (Jesus’) 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.” That is, Jesus’ glorification—you’ll remember from last week that “glorification” refers to Jesus’s being “lifted up” on the cross, from the grave and into heaven—and once His disciples had seen how Jesus was glorified, they “remembered” the events that had happened that first Palm Sunday, but also all of Jesus’ life—the things he had done and the things he had said—and then they understood them.
- We, too, have the advantage of looking at the events described in John’s gospel, chapter 12 verses 12 through 19, in retrospect—with the benefit of knowing what was yet to come—and, like Jesus’ disciples, knowing how Jesus was glorified, we can better understand these verses because we too can “remember” what has been written about Jesus and what has been done to him, too.

- And so this morning, and in tonight’s Second Helping Bible Study on Zoom at 6 pm, we are going to consider John chapter 12 verses 12 through 19 not in isolation but in relation to what was yet to occur in the future, and also what had already occurred and what had been written in the past.
- The title of today’s sermon is Passover, Palms, and Passion. And those three words that begin with the letter P are important to the things we’ll be considering today, but they’re not the only ones—as we work our way through this sermon this morning, listen out for and be mindful of other words that begin with the letter P, because they are particularly pertinent—I don’t know if the children’s series Sesame Street was ever popular on this side of the Atlantic, it was the show where Kermit the Frog and Jim Henson’s Muppets got their start, but when I was a kid each episode of Sesame Street was “brought to you by” a specific letter—and one of the characters, like Elmo, would let you know what it was—(video)—and so you could say that today’s sermon was brought to you by the letter P.
- And the first P-word I want to bring to your attention is this: Passover.
- Let’s look at the first verse of our scripture for today, verse 12: The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.
- “The festival” is the Passover celebration, and John tells us that this crowd gathered “the next day.” John is meticulous about letting his reader know that the things that are happening at this point in his gospel are happening right around the time of the Passover—notice how he starts chapter 12-- Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead—we read of Jesus performing this miracle in Chapter 11, which John ends by saying in verse 55 and following: 55 Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from

the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. 56 They were looking for Jesus and were asking one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? Surely he will not come to the festival, will he?” 57 Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him.—

- Well that’s reason enough for Jesus NOT to come to the Passover festival, isn’t it?

And Jesus is fully aware of the situation, and so we can deduce that if Jesus WERE to come to the Passover festival, he would be doing it quite intentionally—on purpose.

And indeed that is the situation—it is no accident that Jesus shows up for the Passover festival—and John keeps us apprised of the time, saying—the Passover is near, 6 days before the Passover, the next day and so on—and Jesus tells us in Chapter 12, in a verse that we looked at last week, that the “hour has come” for the Son of Man to be glorified. This is no accident, no coincidence that these events are happening at the time of the Passover—this is one of those cases in which this is “the appointed time,” one of those situations about which we might say that “the time had been fulfilled.”

- So this time, the Passover—has been chosen—not Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement—~~even though you might think that would make sense because we talk about the crucifixion being a critical part of what we call the “atonement” and we talk about Jesus’ atoning blood that grants forgiveness for our sins—but Jesus doesn’t choose Yom Kippur to come to Jerusalem—nor does he choose not Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year with its jubilant blasts of the shofar and its celebration of the creation of Adam and Eve—no, Jesus chooses the Passover as the appointed time to enter into Jerusalem, just as you’ll remember John has told us he~~

does in chapter 2—when Jesus goes into Jerusalem and makes his prophetic proclamation about the temple and those who would defile it—when he points to a radically different kind of temple—that of his own body that would be destroyed and raised up in three days. But John tells us that the Jews who heard those words and who witnessed Jesus’ driving out the merchants and the money-changers—these people were perplexed because they lacked understanding—their perspective was problematic.

- But Jesus chooses the Passover festival, even when he knows that he is a marked man—a target of the authorities, and a celebrity who would be easily and immediately recognised—but Jesus says “now is the time.”
- Now the minds of those crowds who had gone out to see Lazarus raised from the dead and had returned to Jerusalem would have been filled with thoughts of the first Passover—of those events that the Passover festival celebrated and commemorated—they would have been remembering and re-enacting that time when the hand of God raised up Moses and granted their people freedom from oppression, rescue from slavery, victory over the iron fist of Pharaoh, when God had demonstrated His power by parting the waters of the Red Sea and bringing them crashing back down on the Egyptian horses and riders who pursued His people. That time when God made a way for them in the wilderness and kept them alive with manna from heaven. When He had entered into a covenant with them, gave them the Law and established them as a Royal Priesthood who would enact his precepts and build his Kingdom.

- And as the crowds in Jerusalem celebrated Passover they would have undoubtedly found rekindled in their hearts and minds a longing for a New Exodus. A new Passover.
- But their longing would have gone deeper than that—they would have been longing not just for a new Exodus, a new Passover, but a new creation.
- Biblical scholar Tom Wright points out that the narratives of the Exodus and the Creation were often tied to each other in the Hebrew tradition—and it makes sense when you consider the two narratives—in the Exodus God had demonstrated his power over the threatening waters of the Red Sea, creating dry land in the midst of them, destroying the enemy and establishing the Children of Israel as co-workers with Him who would do his will as He presided over the earth and provided for their needs-- and in the creation narrative God moves upon the surface of the waters, bringing forth dry land and creating humankind to have dominion over it and to do his will as co-rulers as He provides all they need—
- and these two narratives would have been recalled and held on to at each Passover festival as the years passed by—particularly during the exile, as Dr Wright observes, when Babylon became the new “chaos-monster” from the sea—Daniel chapter 7, to which Jesus refers many, many times, described the enslaving power of Babylon like the rising of arrogant sea-monsters from the depths of the waters—but Daniel also tells of God’s victory over them by exalting, by lifting up, one like a Son of Man to the position of Lord and victor—and what does Jesus refer to himself as over and over again? The Son of Man.
- But as we saw last Sunday, the crowd who shouts “Hosanna” in verse 13 of Chapter 12 of John’s gospel is also the crowd who in verse 34 says “who is this Son of Man

and what are you talking about when you say He'll be lifted up? We thought the Messiah, the Christ, was immortal. We have heard from the Law that the Messiah remains forever"

- But that's getting ahead of ourselves—we'll come back to that.
- These stories and these ideas about the Exodus and Creation and the way that God works throughout history to rescue His people and bring them back into relationship with Him, to guide them and provide for them, these would not have only been on the minds of the people at the Passover festival, but it is clear that John wants us to know how these relate to the story of Jesus
- And so John begins his gospel by telling us that the Word, Jesus, was there with God in the beginning and that all things were made through Him—this is the story of creation—and then Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the Son of Man and makes reference to that passage in Daniel—and maybe the most clear connection between Jesus and the Exodus and Creation and Passover occurs in Chapter 6 of John's gospel when Jesus demonstrates his supernatural influence over the chaos and power of the sea by walking on the water and then in the very next scene refers to Himself as the bread of heaven like the manna that was provided not by Moses but by God in the wilderness—this is the pattern—power over the waters and provision for His people-- that we have seen in both the creation and Exodus narratives and now here in John 6—and Jesus goes on to say that he himself is the bread of heaven and those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life—and we see that statement come to life in the meal he shares with his disciples—when? During the Passover before his crucifixion.

- But this crowd of people who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, who have seen and heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and all the other miraculous works that Jesus has done—this crowd doesn't know about the Last Supper or the crucifixion and resurrection—but they do know that Jesus has done powerful things, and said powerful things—that he was wanted by the authorities—authorities who, when they saw the way the crowd shouted and greeted Jesus, and heard the testimonies of those who had seen Lazarus raised from the dead, said to each other “we can do nothing—the world has gone after Him!”
- And this is the way it might have looked at the moment when those crowds went out to meet Jesus as he entered the city—these people who waved their palm branches and shouted “save us!”—and so our second principal P-word is “Palms,” because I want to consider for a little bit just what's going through the minds of the people who are waving those palms and shouting.
- John gives us a very clear picture of just that in that verse that we just mentioned—in verse 34 of Chapter 12 the people in the crowd tell Jesus that they have read in the Law that the Messiah, the Christos, the Christ, will remain forever—and they're pretty sure that Jesus is that Messiah—that Christ—after all, who else could do the things he'd done—he can raise the dead, after all—but when he starts talking about being the Son of Man and being “lifted up”—being killed—then things don't make sense. They think “the Messiah can't perish.”
- And here we can understand what these crowds are thinking when they welcome Jesus to Jerusalem with shouts of “Save us!” and declare him the King of Israel.
- What had been expected of the Messiah was a King who would fulfil the covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, and also the covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai

described in Exodus—and while Jesus does both of those things—the way he does them is not the way that has been expected. Let me explain.

- The people in this crowd are expecting their victorious deliverer, a prophet like Moses or a King like David who will not only free them from their bondage to the pagan powers of Rome's occupying forces, but also from the oppression of the Scribes and the Pharisees— their religious authorities who are in cahoots with Rome, and who do not help but hinder the people's efforts to live according to the Law and to find relationship with God—but now, at long last, now comes the Liberator who will bring about the defeat of their foes and lead them to their rightful place among the nations of the world—now comes one who would make Israel great again—if there had been red baseball caps back then, we can imagine that they'd have been wearing them as they waved their palm branches and shouted "Hosanna" "Save us" Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the **King** of Israel!"
- But it's in the very next verse that John gives us a hint about what's coming—where he suggests that maybe this crowd isn't going to be entirely satisfied with what Jesus has to offer. Verse 14 reads:
- Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15 "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"
- Jesus is not riding a war horse—Jesus's triumphal entry is not a show of power and destructive force that demands obedience and respect at the risk of retribution—no, just as Jesus has **chosen** the Passover to make his entry, he has chosen a donkey—the symbol of peace and ceremony, of humility and lowliness—the very animal that would become the basis of pagan derision and ridicule in the years that would

follow—remember that graffito about Alexamenos and his donkey-god—the way that the pagans would refer to the early Christians as donkey worshippers?

- Here is another thing that John tells us that the disciples didn't understand at the time, but in retrospect—after Jesus was glorified—they made the connection with the prophecy of Zechariah, and in Zechariah 9:9 it is indeed written: Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
- After Jesus was glorified, the disciples had the benefit of the proper perspective—and we too, knowing what is yet to come in this narrative can look back at the wealth of things that have been written and we can be aware of the things that had been done to Jesus and all the things that Jesus did as well.
- But the expectations of the crowd prevented the people from possessing the proper perspective. They wanted a conquering King but they got the Prince of Peace.
- In fact, as Bible scholar Sherri Brown points out, “if this is the story of a traditional messiah-king, it is the most stunning political failure in the history of the world. Something else must be going on.”
- And something else is going on. Jesus has come to bring salvation, to rescue the oppressed, to reign and rule over His Kingdom, but not in the way that the crowds expect.
- John concludes his description of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem by reminding us in verses 17-19 of the effect that seeing Lazarus raised from the dead had on this crowd. He tells us that people kept talking about it—they “continued to testify”—and John tells us that Lazarus was the reason the crowd went out to meet

Jesus with palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna!”—and this is why the authorities wanted Lazarus dead—because a living Lazarus was a testimony to the power of Jesus

- And even though the Pharisees say to each other that they are powerless to stop folks following after Jesus in verse 19, the truth is that the folks who had seen Lazarus raised from the dead couldn't have fully understood what they were seeing because like the disciples in verse 16, it would not be until after Jesus was glorified that the full meaning of Lazarus' resurrection could be understood. While it was certainly an undeniable and convincing demonstration of the power of Jesus, and it bolstered the idea that they already had that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the conquering King who was going to seize control and establish Israel as a political power—that was a misinterpretation of the fullness of what was happening.
- Because—and here's another good P-word-- Lazarus' resurrection is proleptic—it wasn't just a spectacle for the crowd's entertainment, not just a miracle to convince them of God's power, nor was it simply an answer to prayer to relieve a grieving family--no it was proleptic—prolepsis is when a future event takes place in the present or the past, an occurrence of something in the here and now that has yet to be—like when the coming Kingdom breaks into our daily existence and we get a glimpse of glory—and Lazarus' resurrection is a proleptic occurrence of the coming resurrection of all creation, of which the resurrection of Jesus would be the first fruit.
- Something bigger than just a political overthrow was going on here—this was not just a local incident, not just some earthly historical event, there was something happening here that was bigger than that-- what was happening in and around the

man Jesus of Nazareth was something that had cosmic implications—that's why John begins his gospel by telling us that Jesus, the Word, was in the beginning with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us—the Word took on humanity and moved in to the neighbourhood—

- But the Word made flesh, the Jesus who took on humanity and moved into the neighbourhood doesn't meet the expectations of the crowd who shouts "Hosanna" and waves palm branches. It doesn't take long before they're dissatisfied with this Jesus, this Son of Man, because their idea of what the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord and Ruler, the King of Israel is supposed to be doesn't include suffering and death—doesn't include the Passion—that's our third main P-word—these crowds want to welcome a conquering King but Jesus talks about the Son of Man being "lifted up"—about suffering and servanthood and sacrifice—and that was a paradox --and so by the end of the week, as John describes in Chapter 19, their shouts of "Hosanna, save us!" have turned to shouts of "Away with him, away with him--Crucify him!" and the chief priests declare "we have no King but Caesar" --they wanted something other than what God had provided—they wanted to control the narrative—they did not want to be guided by God's hand nor did they want to give him the authority He deserved.
- There are even those in the crowd, even some of the religious elite, who believe in Jesus, but about whom John tells us in verse 42 that "because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God." **When the serpentine arm of the authorities exercised its persuasive power**, even those who believed

chose something else, human glory, because they didn't think that God's glory was enough—they wanted something else.

- And that's really what's happening in the Palm Sunday narrative, isn't it?
- The Messiah that God has provided, the guidance He has given through Jesus' words and deeds, the way that God is presiding over history and once again working for the salvation, the redemption, of His people and the establishing of a new covenant through the life and death and resurrection of the Son of Man, Jesus, the one who didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped --who is lifted up, glorified, who is emptied out on the cross and calls his disciples to follow his example—that's not enough—that doesn't meet the expectations of the crowd—they want something else
- This is nothing new. It happened at the time of Creation. After God moved on the surface of the waters and brought forth dry land, God placed Adam and Eve in the garden where he provided for all their needs, and gave them guidance about what they should do and how they should live, gave them the opportunity to have dominion over all creation, to care for it, to be co-creators and co-rulers under His Lordship, but that didn't meet their expectations—Adam and Eve listened to the dangerous advice of that snake on a stick--they got their eyes on that forbidden fruit, and considered equality with God a thing to be grasped— God was guiding, God was providing, God was presiding over all things--but it wasn't enough—they wanted something else
- When the children of Israel were in the wilderness—God had raised up Moses and brought them out of bondage, through the Red Sea and God was directing and instructing them as they made their way to the promised land, feeding them with

manna from Heaven, but the people said “this is not enough; we want something else”—we were better off back in Egypt—and even when God provided that snake on a stick that when lifted up would preserve their lives and bring healing, they turned their eyes away from God and turned that serpent into an idol they thought could give them the things they desired-- God was guiding, God was providing, God was presiding over all things--but it wasn’t enough—they wanted something else

- And now when the crowds at the Passover festival look at Jesus, when they hear him talk about the Passion—the suffering and sacrifice—about becoming servants—the crowd says “Wait a minute—we thought you were our Saviour, the Christ, the Messiah, our conquering King, our Liberator”—but you’re nothing but a poor peasant, a profane prisoner, about to be put to death by the principalities and powers. “Crucify him!” –and one who hangs on a tree is cursed—that’s the opposite of being the Messiah in their eyes
- God was guiding, God was providing, God was presiding over all things--but it wasn’t enough—they wanted something else
- And I wonder on this Palm/Passion Sunday in 2021--what do we expect? Are we content to accept God’s provision, God’s guidance, and to let God preside over all things—or do we want to have the final say, to put in our two cents, to critique the way that God is doing things because we think we know better? In 2021, does Jesus live up to our expectations? Are we tempted to turn him into an idol that fulfils our desires? Would we rather make Jesus into a political figure who conquers and dominates our enemies, who makes us feel like we are better than someone else, or do we follow the suffering servant—the humble, donkey-riding, cross-bearing Prince of Peace who overturns the world’s love of power through the power of love? God is

guiding, God is providing, God is presiding over all things—is that enough, or do we want something else? When days are dark and lonely and filled with anxiety and sorrow—or when there’s a pandemic-- sometimes it can be hard to be still and know that God is on our side. But that is the promise.

- As we progress through Holy Week over these next few days let’s remember those 2000 years ago who would struggle to understand what God was doing, not just those in the crowd, but Jesus’ disciples too, who had no way of knowing what to expect from this Jesus who had lived and died among them, whose works they had seen and whose words they had heard. Meditate on what they must have felt when Jesus was like a grain of wheat that was planted in the ground and died. Think of the confusion and loneliness and grief they must have experienced.
- In 2021, we have the privilege of posterity on this side of the resurrection—we can remember what was about to happen. But this week spare a thought for those who were prisoners of the past, who could only progress beyond their present predicament with patience and persistence, predicated on the promises of God. Let’s remember the way that their expectations were about to be exceeded in a dramatic and world-changing way, with cosmic implications--and let’s give thanks—and praise-- to the God who exceeds our expectations as well.
- We hope to see you at our Second Helping Bible study tonight at 6:00 if you can make it—otherwise we hope you have a blessed and a meaningful Holy Week, and we’ll see you on Easter morning.