

April 13, 2025

John 12:12-19

DRAWN TO THE CROSS ...

“Palms and Passion: Jesus for You!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

He had been in the tomb for four days. Those who took away the stone had to smell the pungent odor of death as it wafted out of the darkness of the musty cave when the stone was moved. And the holy record of this true story gives us the real-life drama:

And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

I think I would have been mouth open speechless. I think my eyes would have been darting between Lazarus and Jesus. The realization that there is someone who has the power to raise the dead with the command of his voice would have been ... life altering. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed that these things happened so that we may be certain that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and believing in him, even though we die, yet shall we live!

The context for what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem flows from this monumental event. Those who saw these things and believed became witnesses so that when Jesus comes to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to celebrate the feast of Passover there is a crowd to meet him. At this point what else is there really to say or do other than to say and do what the people said and did? Our gospel lesson records: "So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'"

The cry "Hosanna!" which is transliteration of Hebrew, means "give salvation now!" or "Save us!" Every dedicated Jew would have known of its occurrence in Psalm 118:25 as a part of the song sung every morning by the temple choir during the feast of Tabernacles. Every man and boy would have waved their shoots of willow and myrtle tied with palm branches when the choir would sing the "Hosanna!" in Psalm 118:25. In fact, the Jews often called palm branches "hosannas!" And there is nothing in the Old Testament that prescribes palm branches at the feast of Passover, which is when Jesus enters Jerusalem, whereas the people were commanded at the feast of Tabernacles to take "palm fronds ... and rejoice before the LORD your God" according to Leviticus 23:40. Why? Because the feast of Tabernacles was about the very end and reaching the destination and rejoicing of heaven - the dwelling of the living God.

What is amazing about all of this is that the crowd connects the feast of Tabernacles with the feast of Passover. Here we have words and actions from the feast of resurrection and joy and heaven combined with the feast of the Passover lamb. In fact, on the very day of Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem, that is the day that families would have chosen their lamb for the sacrifice that they would eat at the celebration of Passover, which would be the day that Jesus would institute the New Covenant in his blood. What then do we see in all this? We see **Palms and Passion**. We see Jesus for us - **Jesus for You!** The King rides on a donkey into Jerusalem to die and rise.

In our post-sermon hymn we will be singing: “Ride on, ride on in majesty! / In lowly pomp ride on to die. / Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain, / Then take, O God, Thy pow’r and reign.” The riding on a donkey is best understood through 1 Kings 1 when David orders that his son will ride on a mule to be anointed king. From that point on, sitting or riding on a mule or donkey into Jerusalem was a declaration that the person riding is the legitimate heir to the throne of David. Jesus is the true King of kings who will rule for salvation. Thus the shouts of “Hosanna!” are answered when Jesus comes in humility and peace on a donkey. He has truly come to save you from sin, death, and hell. **Palms and Passion: Jesus for You!**

Our gospel lesson tells us that the fervor of Palm Sunday and the events of that day and everything that followed was connected to the moment when Lazarus was raised from the dead. It helps to explain what the people were seeing in Jesus, and why the Pharisees hated him so much because they perceived him as a threat to their position. The public raising of Lazarus turned everything in such a way that many were drawn to him for eternal life, and his enemies were repelled because he spelled the end to their manufactured kingdom. The same realities are at play in our day. But for those of us who see in Jesus what was finished on the cross and ratified by the empty tomb there is the end of death and hell. Thus, we wave the palms of paradise!

And isn't that the final word on the matter? When Lazarus rose from the dead at the command of Jesus, the people saw “the end game,” if you don't mind me saying it that way. We know as Paul teaches that the wages of sin is death, and if Jesus raises someone from the dead with the command of his voice, then the gift of God is eternal life through him alone. What this means for us is the end of the terror of death and hell. Sin has been paid for in full with the sacrifice of the lamb without blemish on the cross. Even though we still physically die we have nothing to be afraid of. Jesus teaches us in the whole account of Lazarus how we are to see death when we believe in him - in his cross and empty tomb. Jesus said to his disciples:

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

The announcement of Jesus is one powerful word in the Greek about Lazarus that we translate: “he has fallen asleep.” This is a powerful figure of speech which is designed to make the dreadful terror of death into nothing to be feared. Since Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and we believe in him, death is soft and easy. It is like lying down to sleep. You close your eyes and it is the same you that wakes up in the brand new morning. Luther remarks that to speak of sleeping “is to indicate secretly the resurrection from the dead, since they who sleep have the hope of rising again.” So, when we die in Jesus, we close our eyes and wake up in paradise, just as it was promised to the thief on the cross. And one day, as it will be

for the thief on the cross, Jesus will raise up our bodies from the dead and we will have immortal bodies prepared to live in a new creation with our Savior and one another.

Indeed! On the last day he will say to us as he said to Lazarus: “Come Out!” And we will come out of our graves with a spiritual body meant for the glory of God. And since Lazarus was only a foretaste of this reality, for he died again, we know that when we rise from the dead all sin and its sting will be no more. We will understand why everything had to be the way it was. And we will rejoice in the grace of God who used our rebellion in sin to show us the full extent of his love for us so that we might be true eternal companions of him who made and saved us! Do you know what it means to be a companion? It means that we will forever be with him and receive who he is and all that he gives.

Palms and Passion: Jesus for You! Yes! Jesus for You! The promise of eternal life is the raising of Lazarus. And our hosannas to the lamb who was slain have been answered. 1 John 5:12 says that “whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Praise be to God that we have life in Jesus who comes to us in his gospel and sacraments. We hear his voice. We are clean in his water. And his blood in the medicine we need! It is no wonder then that when he returns it will be as it is described according to Revelation 7:9-10,

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could 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!”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott