

Using some thoughts by Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan¹ as a guide today, I'd like for us to reflect on that original Palm Sunday from years ago.

The journey into Jerusalem began with a glorious spectacle of waving palms branches and adoring crowds. As Jesus entered the holy city, some people ran ahead, alerting friends and neighbors, while others threw their cloaks upon the road, crying, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Save us! Save us from Rome! Blessed is the King! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

In that moment of entering Jerusalem, at that triumphant moment, there was nothing the crowd would have denied Jesus. There was nothing they would have refused him. There was nothing they would have withheld. Power... Riches...A throne...They would have jumped at the chance to give it to him. It was all within his grasp.

Or so it seemed.

But this rowdy crowd was just as eager to "get" something as it was to give.

They were hungry—hungry for whatever Jesus could give them that would fulfill their wants. Some were hungry for political status, and they waved their palms for a King who would restore the Jewish state.

Some were starving for power, and so they threw their cloaks before a warrior whom they believed would crush the Roman army.

Some were hungry for comfort, and so they shouted for a hero who could fill their bellies and dry their tears.

Together, these hungry folks waved their palm branches. These palms aren't just pretty branches. To the crowd, these palms represent a Jewish symbol of freedom from not so long ago. About 200 years prior to this first Palm Sunday, the Maccabees, who were a group of Jews, revolted against the foreign occupying Seleucids, and they defeated them. Winning the revolt, the Maccabees established an independent and free Jewish state. And as they formed this independent and free Jewish state, they used the symbol of the palm branch to show that they were glorious in defeating the foreign powers of the Seleucids. They waved palm branches as they celebrated their victory, and they also minted coins with palm branches on them to remind them that they had won their freedom fighting.

¹ This sermon relies heavily on thoughts presented in a Palm Sunday (A) Sermon by Dr. Susan Fleming McGurgan, found online at <http://www.mtsm.org/preaching/>. Any other citations in this sermon are citations that McGurgan makes in the original sermon.

But now, this crowd of Jews gathered around Jesus, they were not free like the Maccabees. They were oppressed and occupied by the Romans, and they were hungry to have what the Jews had once had, only a few hundred years ago. The crowd was hungry for freedom, and it was all within their grasp...or so it seemed.

But God had a different plan. You see, this warrior, this ruler, this king named Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, not a pure-bred stallion. Riding on a donkey was a sign of peace, not war. He wore a homespun cloak, not polished armor. He spoke about freedom from sin and redemption, not the freedom of national sovereignty or imperial might.

The jubilant crowd that lined the road to Jerusalem knew they were seeing a “winner,” but they completely misunderstood God’s vision of success.

They didn’t realize that Jesus had come to conquer not just Rome, but the world. They didn’t understand that Jesus came to the holy city, not to deal death or to sidestep death, but to meet death head-on.

He would conquer the world and death itself...by dying.²

The crowds that ripped branches from trees and screamed with excitement, didn’t understand that their hunger would be eased and their emptiness filled, not by conquest or power or wealth, but their hunger would be eased by the challenge of the cross.

No bible study or theology class can explain the cross completely.³ No sermon or lecture fully outlines its meaning. Yet, all of us who follow Jesus will eventually find ourselves walking that dusty, lonely path to Golgotha, and standing before the cross.

Jesus had warned his disciples when they had figured that he was the Messiah. Jesus told them, “whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.”

From a marketing and advertising standpoint, this message is a disaster. It doesn’t sell well. Just imagine how many followers Jesus might have if he had avoided the cross. What if Jesus said, “Lay down your cross and follow me.” “Ignore your burdens and I will make them disappear.” “I will not suffer, and if you believe in me, you will never suffer, either.” That’s a message designed to keep the palm branches waving and the crowds cheering!

² Byron L. Rohrig, *Christian Century*, March 9, 1988, p. 236.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Abingdon Press, 1998.

There is a famous American preacher named Barbara Brown Taylor, and she says,⁴ “Suffering can be the great killer of faith. It can compress the human soul into a knot of bitter pain and explode our lives into a thousand brittle pieces. Or...Suffering can be the way we discover the depth of our humanity and faith--our capacity for love and beauty--our ability to forgive--our kinship with God and each other.”

For the difference between these two options, we have to look at the cross.

The cross teaches us that suffering can be redemptive, that burdens can be shared, that sins can be forgiven, and that darkness can be scattered, transformed by the power of a loving God.

The cross dares us to believe that life is more powerful than death and that love is more enduring than hate. The cross stands as a reminder that our views of “success” and “defeat” might differ from God’s point of view, and that sometimes, God has a different plan.

As we begin this holy week, we too, have come to the city gate, palm branches waving, agendas in hand, our lists of wants ready.⁵

As we welcome the King into Jerusalem, what are *we* hungering for? And what is it that Jesus comes to feed us?

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Abingdon Press, 1998.

⁵ Byron L. Rohrig, *Christian Century*, March 9, 1988, p. 236.