

Triumph and Tragedy

Luke 19:29-40

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What does Palm Sunday mean?

If someone who wasn't raised in the church came up to you and asked you, "What's with this Palm Sunday thing? What's it all about? What's it mean?" – would you be able to give a good answer?

Think about it, now. We wave palm branches. We shout *hosanna*. But do we even know what those things mean?

Millions of people all over the world are celebrating Palm Sunday today, but – and this might surprise you – not everybody celebrates Palm Sunday like we do.

Imagine, if you can, that you had never celebrated Palm Sunday before. I am going to tell you about some of those other Palm Sunday traditions from around the world, and, as I do, you imagine if any of these traditions would help you better understand the meaning of Palm Sunday?

In Bulgaria, for instance, Palm Sunday is all about welcoming the spring, so they call it *Tsvetnitsa* which means "flower." But that's not all. Also in Bulgaria, which is an Orthodox Christian country, people will decorate their homes with willow branches on Palm Sunday, because they are believed to protect from black magic.

In the Philippines, people will weave and decorate palm fronds into complicated shapes called *palaspas*. They'll bring their *palaspas* to the church to have them blessed and then keep them in their home, because they're believed to ward off evil spirits. Cock-fighting was also a major part of the day in the old days, but it has since been banned.

Speaking of roosters, in the Netherlands, it's all about the rooster. In some towns, kids have a procession where they carry crosses decorated with ribbons. On top of them is a rooster made out of bread. Candies made in the shapes of roosters are given out to children. Why roosters, you ask? I don't know. Maybe because of the rooster that crowed after Peter's third denial of Jesus?

In Latvia, they call Palm Sunday "Pussy Willow Sunday," and, as the name suggests, it prominently features branches from pussy willows. The day begins with waking up the children. But there's a catch. The children can only be woken up by being hit with a pussy willow branch. Parents, I do not recommend that strategy here in Colorado Springs. That's how you get DHS called on you. Then throughout the day, people walk around town or church and hit each other with pussy willow branches.

In Poland, where palm leaves aren't commonly found and spring hasn't yet come, believers bring any green leaves they can find and weave them in with colorful flowers

made of crepe and tissue paper, and attach them to a branch. Here's the best part. Whoever brings the tallest branch to Mass wins the competition. One branch was taller than a 12-story building. Nothing like a little healthy competition to get us in the mood for Palm Sunday, right?

In Finland, children dress up as witches and go house to house exchanging willow branches for candy. My mom, who would not even let us watch *Harry Potter* in the house because it was about witchcraft, would be appalled to know that Finnish people *encourage* their children to dress up as witches for Palm Sunday.

And here at our church, we do a mini-palm procession at the close of Sunday School, in which our children go around to each of the classrooms and hand out palms and invite others to follow them until we're all downstairs. Once there, before I let anyone have any doughnuts, I make them practice the call to worship so that it doesn't sound anemic or weak when we do it here in worship. That's right — I make sure we have a few "ringers" in the congregation, so that it sounds triumphant!

So, you've now taken a tour of some of the world's Palm Sunday traditions. Surely, now you can tell me what Palm Sunday means, right?

I mean it's about hitting children with sticks and dressing up as witches and healthy competition, right? It's about warding off black magic and cockfighting, right?

What is Palm Sunday about?

If we were to turn to the gospels, we'd find that all four of them — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — all tell some version of the Triumphal Entry, which, by the way, is very rare. Usually, two out of the four or three out of the four recount similar events, but it is actually quite rare that all four do.

Take the last supper, for example. Even though it is recorded that Jesus was gathered with his disciples on the night that he was betrayed by all four gospels, only three of those gospels show him instituting the Lord's supper. John is the oddball. In it, Jesus never institutes the Lord's supper. Instead, he washes the disciples' feet.

But the triumphal entry is told in all four gospels. All four depict Jesus riding into the capitol city of Jerusalem on a colt — a young donkey. All four mention some type of crowd of people surrounding him as he rode in, chanting some type of praise and blessing. All four seem to understand the weight of this moment: Jesus' triumphal entry is a coronation. It's the arrival of a new king — but a different kind of king.

All four gospels remember this moment, because what Jesus did on that first Palm Sunday and the way he did it matter.

The great, late New Testament scholar, Frank Stagg, said it like this: “Jesus carefully chose the manner of his entry so as to declare both *the fact* and *the nature* of his messianic claim.” (*Studies in Luke’s Gospel*, 117).

He chose to ride a young colt and not a white horse — the symbol of military triumph.

He came not to restore Israel to a dominate place among the nations of the world, but to bring in the kingdom of God, to create a new people of God under the kingdom.

He came not to take the lives of Israel’s enemies, but to give his own.

You see, he is a different kind of king, and when we wave those branches in his honor for his coronation, we are celebrating the coming of *that* king. On this truth, all four gospels would agree.

But, in the same way that each country has its own unique ways of celebrating this coronation, each gospel also gives us its own unique perspective on the story.

Take Luke’s version, for example — the one we read just a few moments ago. Compared to the others, there are some striking differences in the way Luke tells this story.

For instance, in Matthew, Mark, and John, it is a “very large crowd” (Mt. 21:8) or “many people” (Mk. 11:8) or “the great crowd” (Jn. 12:12) that throng around Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. But not in Luke. In Luke, it’s just “people” (Lk. 19:36) — no great or large or many.

In the others, everyone in those crowds get caught up in the moment and begin shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Mt. 21:19; Mk. 11:9; Jn. 12:13). In Luke, it’s only “the *disciples*” that began to praise God (Lk. 19:37).

And in Luke, there are no shouts of “*Hosanna!*” — did you notice that? *Hosanna* is an Aramaic word meaning, “Save now!” But the people don’t shout *hosanna* in Luke.

Did you notice what else is missing in Luke’s version? There are no palms. In Luke’s version, Palm Sunday has no palms! Instead, the disciples lay only their coats on the ground before Jesus. That means, this should be “Coat Sunday!” We shouldn’t be waving palms. We should be swinging our clothes above our heads — like rabid sports fans!

Why no palms? A lot of scholars think it’s because the waving of palms had specific connotations tied to celebrating *military* victories. Maybe Luke thought that it conflicted too greatly with who he understood Jesus to be. In Luke, the angels at Jesus’ birth announced, “Glory to God in the highest heaven *and peace on earth*” (Lk. 2:14). And here at the triumphal entry, only those who follow Jesus — only those called disciples — shout “*Peace* in heaven and glory to God in the highest heaven” (Lk. 19:38).

No crowds, just his disciples. No “hosannas.” No palms. What is Luke up to?

I think he’s up to exactly the same thing he’s been up to his whole gospel long. He’s pointing to the reality that in this world of ours, there are those who follow Jesus as he is and there are those who reject Jesus because he won’t become what they want him to be. He just will not be made over in their image.

Even here – what happens? “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ [Jesus] answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out!’” (Lk. 19:39-40).

Luke’s version of the triumphal entry is the only one of the four that tells of the Pharisees ordering Jesus to get his disciples to stop celebrating. They just don’t get it! They don’t get the coronation of this new king. If there were ever a time to celebrate, says Jesus, it is now. *All nature sings and round us rings the music of the spheres.* “If these were silent, the stones would cry out in praise!”

Which kind of people will we be?

That old arched stone entryway is one of my favorite things in this church to show guests. If you’ve ever paid close attention to it, then you’ve noticed that the striations of the stones all run parallel to one another all the way around the arch... except for one stone. One stone was set so that its striations run perpendicular to all the rest.

Richard Dockum is the one who pointed that out to me. He’s the one who told me that when they had the stone masons here to erect this beautiful old building, that the stone masons intentionally laid that one stone in the opposite direction. Why? They did it as a reminder that only God makes perfect arches.

“I tell you, if these keep quiet, even the stones would cry out!”

So the question is: will we let the stones do our work for us?

Brett Younger tells this story:

“Karol Daniel was one of my Sunday School teachers during college. For graduation she gave the seniors books she thought we would enjoy. She gave the English major a book of John Keats’ poetry and the Physics major a biography of Albert Einstein. Jon Stewart hadn’t written anything yet, so she gave me a theology book – Sam Keen’s *To a Dancing God*.

Shortly after the gift, but before the thank you note, I read a review of the book by a bad tempered, cantankerous reviewer who wrote, ‘The world is too filled with tragedy to do as Mr. Keen suggests and simply dance.’

When I next saw Karol Daniel she asked, ‘How do you like the book?’

I was still trying to convince people I was smart and so even though I hadn't read a single page I said, 'I think the world is too filled with tragedy to do as Mr. Keen suggests and simply dance.'

Mrs. Daniel looked disappointed, 'Oh, Brett, you're better than that.'

I'm sure she forgot that brief conversation long ago. If I thought she remembered I would call and say, 'You were right. I was foolish. I'm trying to be better than that. I'm starting to understand that the world is too filled with tragedy not to dance'" ("Triumph and Tragedy," a sermon preached at *Broadway Baptist Church*, April 1, 2007).

Palm Sunday stands at the intersection of triumph and tragedy. What begins with shouts of "Hosanna!" will end with shouts of "Crucify him!"

But even Jesus knows that there are times when this world gets things so right that if we didn't cheer, even the stones would cry out.

The question isn't: is there too much tragedy in this world to dance? It's: is there too much tragedy in this world *not* to dance?

Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "There is enough tragedy in the New Testament to make it the saddest book in the world and instead it's the most joyful."

That's because we worship a God and we follow a king who turn tragedy into triumph;
who turn sickness into the health and hunger into fullness;
who turn rejection into acceptance and loneliness into love;
who turn despair into joy and even death into life.

So the only question that's left in mind is: which kind of people will we be?

Will we let the stones do our work?

Amen.