

Sermon “Not What We Ordered”
Kirk of St James
Sunday March 29th, 2026 (Palm Sunday)
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In the news this week was a story that began with a Starbucks DoorDash order. The woman who received the order had checked her security camera and saw 78-year-old Richard Pulley carefully navigating up her stairs, dropping off her order, and then leaving. Wondering why this gentleman was still working Brittany Smith reached out. After meeting Richard, she heard that the former insurance salesman had been retired for fifteen years, and his wife who decided to keep working had recently lost her job. He picked up the work with DoorDash because they were finding by the time they had paid their necessary bills and medications they did not have enough money. In the last year Richard had completed six thousand deliveries, with his wife often going to spend time with him. Brittany launched a GoFundMe called “Give Richard a Chance to Rest Again.” She raised over \$900 000 dollars in a matter of days. Later when they couple were being interviewed, they expressed how overwhelmed they were that people from across the United States and beyond—people who had never met them--were willing to help. What struck me was that in one of the interviews someone made the comment that for the most part it was small donations that added up and then they reflected on the power of people when they act together for the good of others.

As we come into Easter Holy Week, we repeatedly see the power of a crowd for better and worse—and unfortunately, this week mostly for worse. On Palm Sunday the church typically observes either the Liturgy of the Palms or the Liturgy of the Passion. At the Kirk we tend to observe the Palms, because the rest of the story will be told later in the week on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. The Juxtaposition of these two events is brutal. “Celebration and praise converge with loss and grief; strength and vulnerability share one liturgical moment, inviting us to shout “Hosanna!” while also bracing ourselves for the poignancy of the

crucifixion and the mourning that follows.” There is an incredible amount of emotional whiplash that occurs in a mere seven days. That is one of the interesting things about scripture, it is not just about the narrative but also about the movement. We will begin in triumph, into complete despair, and then against all odds end in joy, and in order to understand Easter morning, we must first see the hope that quickly gives way to betrayal.

Now as we have mentioned before each of the gospel writers was writing with a particular audience in mind. For Matthew there is a pronounced Jewish orientation. Throughout this gospel we often hear scripture not only being quoted but also being pronounced as fulfilled, which we will certainly see this morning. Another interesting aspect of Matthew that one writer pointed out is that, “The crowds’ function as a character in Matthew, as disciples en masse.” They appear at the beginning of his ministry and, coming from all around the region they begin to follow him. I deeply appreciated Homiletics and Christian Education professor Veronice Mills who wrote the following description, “It reveals the uncommon courage of common folk who have experienced a presence so powerful, a message so compelling, and a love so complete that they transgress the boundaries of religious and civil acceptability to make the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Many of them live in villages and towns outside of Jerusalem. Others have travelled from as far away as Jericho, sorely needing the life-sustaining sustenance that Jesus so freely gave.” As they prepared to enter Jerusalem in the days before the Passover crowds and emotions have been building.

Jerusalem was a city of about 40 000, but the population could swell to over 200 000 in the lead up to Passover. (I was wondering how this compares to Prince Edward Island and we are an island of 182 000 and we welcomed 1.87 million visitors to our island last year!) When people gather and crowds swell, feelings can become amplified. We have been watching our neighbours to the south over the last year, and how things have been unfolding. For example, the crowds in Minnesota protesting when ICE enforcement stepped up, and how explosive

things became. I was also thinking about Iran, and the recent protests and subsequent crackdowns. People coming together to give voice to things that matter. The Arab Spring in 2011 is another example.

In Matthew we have these crowds that have been following Jesus, and then in our reading today we hear Jesus quoting from Zechariah 9:9, “Look your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.” There were hopes and expectations around the Messiah and what the Messiah would do. Some of these hopes included the violent overthrow of Rome’s occupying forces and their collaborators. At any rate, this triumphal entry is a bold messianic claim, and Rome will not let it go unchallenged. Here is the thing though, often when a crowd gets swept away in a moment, they are not necessarily thinking of consequences, they are responding to the immediate situation.

On Palm Sunday we see the crowd singing, “...royal hymns or chants. Welcoming Jesus as “son of David” was about as explicit as you could get; this was, after all, the city which King David had made his capital a thousand years before, and for nearly half that time the Jews had been waiting and praying for a king like David to arrive and save them from oppression. Surely, they thought, this is the moment.” Of course, they are going to embrace what is happening as Jesus enters the city—they are on the cusp of change, there is no going back now, shots have been fired over the heads of Roman authority, and justice will finally be done. We know all too well the relief of an answer after an extended period of waiting. It comes like a breath of fresh air. It is like throwing open the windows to spring, after the long stale lock down of winter.

When Jesus enters the city, it is described as, “being in turmoil” the Greek word they used literally means “was shaken” or, “trembled”—the very foundations of the city whether literal or metaphorical were shaking. They are shouting Hosanna which means, “save (or help) I pray.” There are no mysteries here about what they believe is going to happen, which is why the events that follow, are perhaps not as shocking as we might think. The arrest of Jesus, and what

happens afterwards would have been gutting for the people. They had put their trust in this man, they believed he was the one who was going to restore their nation and throw off their enemies, their waiting for centuries was finally going to be over.

Then Jesus is arrested, put on trial and sentenced to death. There are few things as devastating in this world as disappointed hope, and we see that reality firsthand when they change their chants to crucify him. They did not understand. Even the crowd that had been following Jesus and witness to his teachings and miracles had not yet caught on to what it truly meant. This was never a story about overthrowing Rome—it was about something so much bigger. “They wanted to be rescued from evil and oppression, but Jesus was going to rescue them from evil in its full depths, not just the surface evil of Roman occupation and the exploitation of the rich.” Palm Sunday is much like the moment when you are on a roller-coaster, and you have just crested the highest peak, and you are about to plunge down the incline. Your stomach is going to be in your throat, your fear is going to spike, and the rush will be disorienting.

I would like to close with a few words from N.T Wright who wrote, “The story of Jesus’ grand, though surprising entry into Jerusalem, then, is an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God’s answer. The bad news is the crowds are going to be disappointed. But the good news is that their disappointment, though cruel, is at the surface level. Deep down, Jesus’ arrival at the great city is indeed the moment when salvation is dawning. The ‘Hosannas’ were justified, though not for the reason they had supposed. To learn this lesson is to take a large step toward wisdom and humility, and towards genuine Christian faith.” There is no going back now for either Jesus or ourselves, for better or worse we are now in Jerusalem.