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Bethany Presbyterian Church

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

March 24, 2024 – Palm Sunday

***Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29***

***O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!***

***2Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”***

***19Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.***

***20This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.***

***21I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.  
22The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.  
23This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.  
24This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
25Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!***

***26Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
27The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.***

***28You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.***

***29O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.***

***Mark 11:1-11***

***11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’ ” 4They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” 6They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. 7Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. 8Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,***

***“Hosanna!  
    Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
10    Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”***

***11Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.***

Today’s text begins here in Chapter 11 of the gospel of Mark. By Chapter 15, Jesus will be arrested. **Day 1**, we are waving our palm branches in celebration upon Jesus’ entry into the city, how many of us will still be celebrating and waving and supporting him, by the time we get to chapter 15? Let’s walk through it together.

1. **Day 2**. Jesus comes back from Bethany to Jerusalem and is hungry. Sees a fig tree, goes to find something to eat, but there is nothing, because it is not the season for figs – Jesus curses the tree. Is Jesus “hangry?” to the temple, ousts anyone buying or selling, wouldn’t let anyone carry anything through the temple. You have made what should be a house of prayer, a den of robbers. Mark 11:18 **18**And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, **they kept looking for a way to kill him**, for they were afraid of him because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. **19**And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. Because we know how this story ends, we know that this is the beginning of the end for Jesus. If we were there, would we still be waving our palm branches, cheering him on? Maybe, because we still have adrenaline, we’re still amped up. Jesus was a little intense, but hey, he’s got a right.
2. **Day 3**. Returns to Jerusalem again (spent the night in Bethany again) and the disciples notice that the tree that Jesus cursed is indeed withered! Jesus explains that it is an example of how anything you pray for will happen – if… “Jesus answered them, “**Have faith in God**. **23**Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you **do not doubt in your heart** but **believe that what you say will come to pass**, it will be done for you. **24**So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, **believe** that you have received it, and it will be yours.” And then he adds this: 25 “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” This is a very normal thing for Jesus to say. Even before he entered Jerusalem for the Passover, he had been teaching in this way. This time though, he was not answering a specific question about forgiveness, but uplifting forgiveness as an item central for prayer. Remember to have faith in God, pray with believing hearts and do not doubt that your prayer will be answered.

1. **Day 4**. Having gone to Bethany that night, Jesus returns to Jerusalem the next day. In the temple on Day 1 remember, the chief priests and scribes were looking for ways to kill Jesus. They question his authority with questions about the baptism of John. Then Jesus began to teach in many parables. Every parable seemed to have a message against the authorities. The wicked tenants, paying taxes, questions about the resurrection, which is the first commandment? Each level of temple authority took their turn asking Jesus a question, trying to catch him in something, anything so they could arrest him. The Chief priests, the pharisees, the Sadducees and the scribes. Jesus even told a parable about a widow who in giving her last coin gave more than the rich man who gave much, even criticizing the treasury. At the end of these parables, “no one dared to ask him any more questions.” By the time Jesus answered the question, “who is David’s Son” and completely stymied the authorities, “…and the large crowd was listening to him with delight.” It must have been like a boxing match, gathering crowds to just watch the sparing between Jesus and the authorities. Jesus seems to be *trying* to make enemies! He’s picking on *everyone* – is there *no one* in the temple we temple goers can interact with and still follow Jesus? We are in the crowd watching the boxing match – are we still standing by waving our branches?
2. Outside of the temple then, the disciples comment about the large stones that make up this beautiful temple. But Jesus tells them that no stone will be left unturned, that stone will pile upon stone and the temple will be no more. Jesus’ warnings are starting to sound crazier and crazier. Beware he says. He foretells his own persecution, warns about the signs of the end of his days, quoting ancient words, “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” Jesus’ pronouncements are getting darker and darker, and stranger and stranger. Finally he says to his disciples, 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” I don’t know about you, but I may be turning in my palm branch right about now. When you need a Messiah, you find someone who you really hope and believe is the One, we finally decide to take a stand and take part in this social justice march, and come into Jerusalem with Jesus, all of us waving palm branches – when is it just too much? When does it become all too real and yet also all too strange and impossible at the same time? What are the risks, we might ask ourselves. Is now the time?
3. **Day 5**: “It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, 2 for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.” Jesus’ enemies are raging. On this day, he is still in Bethany where he has been going every evening. In someone’s house, a woman anoints his feet with expensive oil and wipes his feet with her hair. One of his disciples, Judas, has been tempted by a soldier and agrees to betray Jesus. Jesus finds a house that has an upper room, and invites all of his disciples there to enjoy their Passover meal together, and institutes the meal that we have come to enjoy in his name, sharing the meal “in remembrance of me.” If we were there, if we were some of the few remaining waving our palm branches in celebration, it must have been quietly deeply meaningful. I wouldn’t want to have missed it. Outside the house, “When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 27 And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ 28 “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” 29 Peter said to him, “Even though all fall away, I will not.” But Jesus said to him, I am imagining, with his hand on Peter’s shoulder, quietly saying “oh but you will.” 31 But Peter said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” “And *all of them* said the same.” Jesus goes away to pray, while Judas betrays Jesus to the authorities, they come and arrest Jesus. As he was arrested, the gospel of Mark tells us, “50*All of them* deserted him and fled.” What happened to our hosanna’s, our waving celebratory palm branches?

Later this week we will have a chance to ponder these things. On Friday, the church will be open from noon until 3pm when we are all invited to come and sit and reflect in quiet for a time. There will be five separate tables with prompts for us to consider all that our hearts have been through during this holiest of weeks. Because we know the story, we know what happened after Jesus was arrested, how Jesus was passed from authority to authority, no one wanting to be the one who actually sentenced Jesus do death. And finally we know of his awful time on the cross when so many who once carried palm branches in celebration melted away, or joined the crowd who shouted “crucify him!” The tragic arrest, the horrible betrayal, and the sentence of death are all ahead of us this week. **Good Friday** – the only reason it is good, is because we know what came next. Next is what I have sometimes called **Silent Saturday**, a day given for reflection after the cross and before the stone was rolled away on Easter morning.

It's one thing to try to imagine ourselves in ancient times, being a disciple, hoping we’d have the faith to follow the messiah. And knowing that the cross was not the end of the story, knowing that the resurrection was to follow, helps us to imagine ourselves as frightened maybe but brave.

The resurrection was not the actual end of the story. The resurrection that we celebrate next week is the glorious message that death never wins. Death, even death on a cross, was defeated!

On Palm Sunday we usher in this week with great celebration, knowing though that the days ahead mark remembrances of the suffering of Christ. I invite us to consider how it is we wave palm branches today. Not actual branches of course, but what ideas, people, actions, groups do we follow?

Rev. Dr. Penny Nixon once told me that her favorite place was behind a bullhorn. I shivered a bit, and said, oh, man, I could not do that. She said, that’s ok, someone has to make the coffee.

How far are we willing to go with our waving palm branches, or our waving signs, or our waving flags, during a march; a letter writing campaign; a mission trip. Will we show up somewhere or somehow to demand a cease fire in Gaza? Will we show up at a legislative session and demand a woman’s right to health care be codified in our constitution? Will we be part of any long term solutions – join with groups seriously working on our housing crisis; join with groups seriously working on ending the struggle for families who just want to eat? How much of ourselves are we willing to invest to help even a small part of humanity live a better life?

This week, I was very moved by a couple of things that are still stirring in my heart. I hope to make a change. When I was a kid my dad always said I was going to be a lawyer. He said I was going to change the world. I lovely thing to tell your small daughter. Many years later, when I told my church-doubting dad that I was going to seminary, he suggested that maybe I’m still going to change the world, but from the church instead of a court room. Well, I don’t know about changing the world, but I sure am going to at least start making some coffee.

Who wants to join me?

Let’s pray…