

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Palm Sunday

April 2, 2023

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

God's power on display

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² telling them, "Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

⁶ The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. ⁹ The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹ And the crowds were saying, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

—Matthew 21:1-11

Everybody loves a parade! And when we think about what it is that makes parades so special and fun, it's not hard to see why. Maybe there are marching bands playing moving music and marching in perfect formation. Think of the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena every year, and we think of beautiful floats, exquisitely decorated with millions of flowers. Think of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, and we think of big, fun inflatable characters making their way through the streets of New York City. Or maybe it's just a small-town Fourth-of-July parade with a fire engine and a police car with flashing lights and sirens, the local VFW contingent, and a few trotting horses. And everyone is excited, waving at the parade participants, waving flags. It's fun! It's exciting to be part of something big, to see something special. And then there are those parades that we don't really do in our country, but they seem to do in other countries. I'm talking about the parades through Red Square in Moscow and Tiananmen Square in Beijing and Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, North Korea, the parades where there are tanks on display and military hardware and ballistic missiles and thousands of soldiers marching in formation. Those parades are intended to display power, to instill national pride.

I don't know if we can call the event of Palm Sunday a parade; perhaps more of a "procession." There were no marching bands or displays of military power, no soldiers on stallions with gleaming armor and plumed regalia. The excitement was on the sidelines, as people stripped palm branches off the trees and spread their cloaks out to pave the road. They waved and they danced and they shouted, "Hosanna!" "Save us!" as Jesus of Nazareth rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

How big was the procession on Palm Sunday? We don't know, but it was a big enough event that Matthew tells us "The whole city was stirred and asked, 'Who is this?'" It was big enough that Jesus' enemies the Pharisees cried out in frustration to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" It was big enough that some of the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" Don't let them talk like this. Tell them to knock it off!—to which Jesus replied that if they were silent even the stones would cry out. So we know that the Palm Sunday procession was big enough that it drew a big crowd and generated a lot of excitement, but at the center of all the attention there was no great pomp or earthly power, just a humble man, sitting on a borrowed beast, as Jesus of Nazareth rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

But here's the story behind the story. The man on the donkey is no mere man. He entered this world when the Spirit of God came upon a virgin girl, so that what was conceived in her womb was the Son of God. This Jesus is the one who from eternity possessed all glory with God the Father in heaven. He is the one whom angels worship and adore. He is the Christ, in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. For 33 years he has kept the commandments and obeyed his Father perfectly. And now he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. Humble, meek, poor, the servant of servants. He is riding into Jerusalem at the beginning of this Holy Week. His journey will take him to the temple, to the upper room, to the garden, to betrayal, to trial, and finally to a cross. And on that cross, he will pour out his blood and die for the sins of the world. Weakness, humility, poverty, shame—these are the marks of this man Jesus. But behind the mask of weakness, the humility and the shame is on full display the greatest power of God, as Jesus of Nazareth rides into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The crowds are watching for the power of God to be on display. They've seen and heard of the miracles Jesus has performed. Just over the hill and down the street is the town of Bethany and the house of Mary and Martha

and the cemetery where their newly-raised brother Lazarus spent four days as a corpse. Now the crowd is expecting even bigger demonstrations of power. They want to see Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, sent packing, along with his hated Roman soldiers who kept the Jews under occupation and oppression. They want to see a new day for Israel, the throne of King David restored, ushering in the era of the Messiah, an era of peace and prosperity for all God's people. People were watching for that power, they were waiting for that power, they wanted to be part of that powerful movement, that revolution that set King Jesus on the throne. Yes, the expectations from the crowd were sky-high, as Jesus of Nazareth rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

But a crowd is a fickle thing. When the soldiers arrested Jesus on Thursday night, even his most loyal disciples—the very ones who spread their cloaks before Jesus on Sunday—ran off into the darkness surrounding Gethsemane, and denied that they even knew him. And on Friday morning the shouts of “Hosanna!” were no more. Instead, “Crucify” was the word of the day. The crowds had their idea of what God's power should look like, and when Jesus didn't show them *that* kind of power, the crowd turned against him and clamored for his death.

But even as the spit flew into Jesus' face and the blows landed on his back, and the whip tore open his skin, and the nails pierced his hands and his feet, and as he cried out, “It is finished!” and breathed his last and died—even then, when Jesus' cold, lifeless body was taken down from the cross, God's power was on full display. In the weakness, suffering, and death of Jesus, God's power was on full display. It is God's power to forgive sins. It is God's power to justify and declare wicked people righteous. It is God's power to break the grip that Satan holds on human hearts and to set people free from bondage to hell. It is God's power to reconcile human beings to him, to take filthy sinners and make us clean, to offer up on the altar of the cross the final and ultimate sacrifice, so that the world's debt to God is paid, and forgiveness is won for all people. That's the power that was on full display in the weakness, the humility, and the shame. That's the power that was on full display as Jesus of Nazareth rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

This past week I was in Milwaukee for meetings. Last Sunday afternoon I was at the Milwaukee airport picking up my rental car. I got to the checkout booth—the place where they check your driver's license and rental contract—and there was a young man sitting in the booth. He handed back my driver's license and said, “Let me ask you a random question. Apart from money and family, what motivates you?” I said, “Jesus.” He chuckled and said, “That's the best answer I've heard all day.” But then he went on to say, “Lately I've been losing faith in the world. I pray for things to happen, but they don't work out. I don't know where to turn.” We talked a little bit more, I asked what part of town he lived in, and I wanted to suggest that he visit a church not far from his house, but before I could do so, another car pulled up behind me waiting to get out, and he had to wave me through. His last request was, “Would you pray for me? My name is Earl.” I told him I would pray for him, so I've been praying for Earl. On Thursday, when I returned the rental car at the Milwaukee airport, I checked the booth, but Earl wasn't working that day. Who knows? Maybe next time I'm up there our paths will cross again.

There are a lot of Earls in the world, and sometimes you and I feel like Earl: We pray for things to happen, but they don't work out. We look at a culture spinning out of control. Boys are convinced they can be girls, and girls think they are boys—and their peers and adults encourage them to explore their true feelings and find themselves, regardless of science, regardless of reality. The worst kind of immorality is rampant and socially acceptable—adultery, fornication, homosexual behavior, pedophilia and bestiality. These things are not new, and they're just as putrid in God's nostrils now as they have always been, but they're becoming more flagrant in our time. The world is a messed-up place, and we pray, “God, use your power to fix things!” Clean up the corruption in Washington! Stop the war in Ukraine! Put a halt to the crime that ravages our communities! Lower the price of gas at the pump! Make my neighbor be a nicer person! And we don't hear God speak. We don't hear him thunder from the heavens and hurl lightning bolts at the transgressors. And we cry out, “How long, O Lord? How long?”

We can become frustrated with the church. Why doesn't the church do more to make a difference in the world? Why can't we be more successful in advancing the cause of social justice? Getting people elected who will advance Christian values and stop persecution of God's people and make it easier to be a Christian in the world? And then we hear Jesus say, “My kingdom is not of this world,” and we reply, “But we want it to be of this world, and we want to see your power in this world, and we want you to *do something* in this world!” And Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has seen fit to give you the *kingdom*! Take heart, your sins are forgiven!” And we say, “I don't want to hear about forgiveness and heaven—I already know all about that! I want money to pay my bills. I want my health restored. I want my loved ones back. I want the world around me fixed, and I want you to use your power to take the stress out of my life and make things easier!” And without realizing it, we've become just like the crowds on Palm Sunday. We want fire engines and flashing lights! We want marching bands and military might! Show us some *power*, God! And the Son of God comes riding into town on a donkey.

If our hearts are calloused and worldly, we will certainly miss it. But when our hearts are broken and contrite, we can see it as clear as day. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, he chose that path for me. His humility is the perfect atonement for my arrogant pride that presumes to tell God what to do. His suffering is the perfect substitute for my life of ease and self-serving contentment. His poverty is the perfect redemption for my selfish ambition and greed. His obedience is my righteousness. Jesus is my Savior, and I need that man on the donkey

more than anyone else, because this much is true: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. And there in that Palm Sunday procession I see God's greatest power on display: his grace. His love that rescues and saves the unlovable. God's power was on display when you were washed with water and the Word in your baptism, and you were brought powerfully into God's family. God's power is on display in bread and wine when he tenders his body and gives us to drink of his blood, and all the forgiveness won for you at the cross is placed onto your lips. God's power is on display in all his love that takes miserable, undeserving wretches and speaks gently to us and says, "Your sins are forgiven. I have called you by name. You are mine!"

People cast Jesus aside because he doesn't scratch them where they itch, he doesn't give them what they want, he doesn't bow to their beck and call, and he doesn't deliver on demand. Instead he models weakness, humility, poverty, suffering, and in those things God's power continues to be on full display. In the cross. In Christ crucified. In Jesus of Nazareth, who rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, seated on a donkey. Amen.