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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

### “Pom-Pom Sunday”

Mark 11:1-11

The other day a pastor friend of mine shared a story of a conversation with her four-year-old daughter.

She asked, “Mom, when is the next Sunday?”

In two days.

“That’s when we get to do the pom-poms?!?”

What?

“That’s when we get the pom-pom branches at church? My Bible school teacher said so!”

Oh, no, honey, you get *palm* branches. It’s *Palm* Sunday.

“Not Pom-Pom Sunday?”

No. But that sounds fun. Maybe we can have that a different week.

Most of us who’ve spent any time in church have gotten pretty familiar with the imagery of Palm Sunday – of Jesus riding in on a donkey, while we wave palm branches and shout “Hosanna!” And that’s how the story goes, of course, but for many of us it’s become so familiar that we’ve lost a sense of how strange it is.

Why *are* we waving palm branches?? Why *not* pom-poms? It might make just as much sense; or probably more sense in a world where cheerleaders are familiar – we know exactly what pom-poms mean! – but we have to order palm branches shipped in from Florida, making sure they get here on time but not so early that they’ll start to dry out before Palm Sunday.

And yet those who witnessed Jesus enter Jerusalem on that day would have known exactly what it meant for them to gather along that street, around a peasant country boy riding absurdly on a young donkey, his feet maybe dragging along the ground as they spread their cloaks out in a royal welcome for someone who was almost a parody of a king. In this occupied city with potential messiahs on every street corner, the people knew their biblical symbols like the backs of their hands, watching out for those prophecies that would mark the one who came to overthrow the Roman empire and save them from their oppression.

Zechariah had prophesied that the final battle between Israel and their enemies would be kicked off by a march into the city from the Mount of Olives, and the palm branches were a common way to celebrate the pilgrims coming into the city for Passover. They knew festival processions, and even holy processions, like the celebration in Psalm 118, the ark of the covenant returning to the temple, the rulers of Israel riding back into their city.

They knew what a royal procession looked like, too. Some biblical scholars have suggested that there might have been two processions into the city on that Palm Sunday, as Passover approached and the people of Israel got ready to celebrate the release of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. Just as this revolutionary fervor was getting stirred up, it’s quite possible that Rome was sending in a parade of their own – a military cavalry, up on their horses, armed to the teeth, in their shiny matching armor,

meant to intimidate the people and remind them exactly what they were up against. *They* were the ones who would have had cheerleaders, who could hire people to fake some enthusiasm.

And so, amidst all this symbolism and intimidation and carefully measured celebration, Jesus plans his own entry into the city. He chooses the colt deliberately – very deliberately, as Mark tells it, spending more time on the story of the disciples finding the never-before-ridden and therefore ritually pure donkey than on the parade itself – and the disciples spread their cloaks in a royal welcome for this unknown small-town preacher. While across the city, Rome flexes its muscles with trumpeters and intimidation, this upstart rabbi from the Galilee gets a royal welcome, lauded like their real king while his untrained donkey wanders in, shuffling where it wants; or not, like a cat on a leash.

It is absurd. A parody of kingship. Today it might be called a protest march, or street theater – the kind of demonstration that news outlets would cover with disdain, saying “they don’t appear to have any defined message,” and “wouldn’t identify any leaders of their movement,” and “the apparent instigator of this riot refused to comment.”

And what were they shouting? Hosanna? It comes from Aramaic and used to mean “save us please,” and yet they’re saying it like Alleluia, like it’s a word you use to welcome a king. But maybe that’s deliberate too, and maybe they’re saying more than we think. Maybe they do mean “save us,” and maybe they also mean “alleluia.” Maybe in their longing for something new, this is a word for someone who might save them – it’s not a plea, but more of a desperate, joyful hope.

Maybe you’re the one! Savior! Can you, this strange humble king, really be the one to change the world and save us from the all-consuming power of the ones who oppress us? Maybe you’re the one?

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Friends, hold on tight. This week is going to be a tough one. We are called to follow Jesus on this walk into Jerusalem that is part parade, part demonstration, part funeral procession. As he does all he can, it seems, to anger and frustrate those in power, his closest friends will leave him, will betray him, until only two women and one man, under cover of darkness when no one will know him, finally take his broken body down from the cross to prepare it gently for the the tomb.

We call it Holy Week because it is that, but also because we can’t exactly call it “Jesus, what on earth are you doing?!” Week, “You’re going to get yourself killed” Week.

It is a week that ends at the cross, in the tomb. And that is a scandal for us who do all we can to avoid thinking about death, and torture, and suffering. Why would we follow Jesus *there*, of all places? Can’t we just go about our lives and come back next Sunday after all that messy business is done, and sing our Alleluias and not think too hard about what’s in between?

And yet Jesus’ path had to go through that tomb because for so many of God’s beloved children, that tomb is reality. That tomb and that suffering are part of what it means to be human.

For all of us who have suffered –  
who have known the desperate sorrow of weeping for a beloved, lost too soon;

who have been abused and broken and longed for the safety of a nice quiet tomb to crawl into;  
who have been betrayed by those we called our friends;  
who have been beaten and tortured in the name of “keeping the peace”;  
who have been swallowed up by the machine of power and forgotten their humanity;  
for those dehumanized, again and again, by systems that have forgotten how to be human –  
for all of these, all of *us*, Jesus says, I know. I’m sorry.

This is a week of complicated symbols and contradictory messages – death but life, betrayal and yet community – because we live in a complicated in-between time, when we, humanity, have known all the suffering and agony of the cross, in excruciating detail if we have ears to hear; and yet we still wait for a full Easter restoration. We catch glimpses of it, resurrection in flashes and bursts and quiet growing wholeness, but the true Easter redemption that we hope for is still, yet, another sunrise away.

And so for now, we wait. We work. And we follow Jesus through this week: this week of drama and pageantry, stillness and prayer, friendship and holy community, betrayal, pain, and loss. We walk his path because it is our path, and the path we so often force upon others.

Our savior is coming, both king and clown, regal and comical, humble and full of all divine power. And we follow him, not with pom-poms and simple cheerleading – yay, Jesus! – but with palm branches and all the complicated symbolism they bring. We walk with Jesus in his peace and in his suffering, and we are called to walk with one another, even when those paths lead to crosses and to violence.

Because, like it or not, that is the path that will lead to Easter. We can’t get to the empty tomb before we deal with the bloody and broken truth of the body *in* the tomb.

So let us join this odd procession, this motley crew of seekers and hoppers, of broken ones and healing ones, shouting joyful, pleading Hosannas to the one in whom we place our trust. This way lies death. And only from there can we get to resurrection.