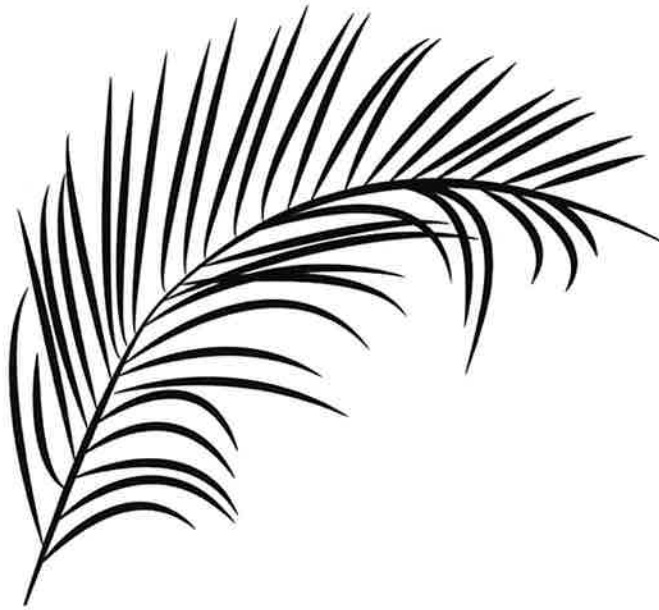




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Palm Sunday – March 29, 2026

The Power of Palm Sunday

Zechariah 9:9-10; Psalm 118:19-29; Revelation 21:1-7; Matthew 21:1-11



[Matthew 21:1-11] *When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

The gospels tell us that several days before Passover, Jesus enters Jerusalem from the east, riding a donkey down the Mount of Olives while people spread cloaks and branches along the road. They shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in God's name!" It is an exuberant procession and the height of Jesus' public recognition. Some hail him as a prophet while others venture that he is the long-awaited Messiah, the one from David's line who will restore justice and peace.

It is possible to cast Palm Sunday as just a brief moment of joyful recognition before the week descends into chaos and crucifixion. But if we look at the details, it's clear that Palm Sunday does not simply derive its meaning from what comes later in the week. Today has its own message of divine identity and purpose.

Because everything that happens on Palm Sunday connects with the deepest hopes of the Jewish people. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, he fulfills Zechariah's prophecy that the king who liberates Judah from imperial rule will come not on a war horse but a donkey, animals associated with times of peace and humble labor. So Jesus' arrival makes a theological claim that God's

reign comes not through military might but nonviolence.

Palm Sunday places before us two very different visions of power.

That vision of power doesn't appear only in the choice of a donkey. It also appears in what the crowd places in the road. Palms were an important part of Sukkot, a Jewish festival that remembers a time when the people lived in temporary shelters, dependent on God's care in the wilderness. The palms carry deep memory, recalling a people who learned to trust that liberation comes through faithful endurance. When the crowd waves palms before Jesus, they are embodying hope: hope that God still comes to dwell among us, that peace is possible, and that the world can be made whole.

The Palm Sunday procession proclaims to all who find themselves on the margins that the kingdom of God is at hand, that a new age is dawning in Jesus. And it also has something to say to those who place themselves at the center – the imperial occupiers of Jerusalem and the Judean leaders who enforce their grip on the people.

Because historically, there was likely another procession entering the city that same day. It was standard practice for Roman governors of Judea to be in Jerusalem for the major Jewish festivals, bringing additional troops to maintain order and quell unrest. Passover was especially volatile because it celebrates liberation from an earlier empire. So as Jesus entered the city from the east, Pontius Pilate would have come from the west with soldiers and banners, a visible reminder that Rome governed by superior force.

On that day, Jerusalem receives two different messages about what saves us. One says security comes through strength, control, and domination. The other reveals salvation in humility, courage, mercy, and love embodied in human life. Holy Week begins with this subtle but unmistakable contrast — an invitation to consider which vision of power we trust, and which path we are willing to follow.

For roughly the last 50 years, it has been the custom in the Episcopal Church to observe two distinct things on the first day of Holy Week. Since the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, Palm Sunday has also been called the “Sunday of Passion.” We hear two gospel readings —

the story of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem at the beginning of the service and then the long reading of John’s Passion as the principal gospel lesson. There can be a kind of liturgical whiplash as we re-enact the joyful procession, singing, “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” outside the church and then recount Jesus’ betrayal, trial, suffering, and death once we get inside.

This custom came about because attendance at Good Friday services had dropped off, and many people moved from the excitement of Palm Sunday to the joy of Easter without ever recalling what comes between.

The idea was to make the Passion story prominent on Palm Sunday so that we enter Easter with full awareness of Good Friday’s themes: the cruelty and injustice that often accompany outsized power, the weakness and confusion that can come with fear, the way evil can snowball from small lies and self-preservation. And most important, how Jesus’ humble and willing journey to the cross exposes all of this as not God’s way.

But we are not going to hear the Passion today. We are only observing Palm Sunday. Because we’ll all be here on

Good Friday, right? And also because, on its own, Palm Sunday speaks directly to the moment we are living in – a moment that grapples with different visions of power.

First, joy is never a mistake. Yes, Jesus' followers who shout "Hosanna" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God" are also the ones who, five days later, are traumatized and grieving at the foot of the cross. But their joy on Palm Sunday is real.

They recognize what God is doing in their midst – Jesus has opened their eyes to their birthright of dignity and worthiness and knitted them together into a community of love and faithfulness. The solidity and freedom of that new identity is worthy of rejoicing and will sustain them in the days ahead. Joy must be seized and relished whenever and wherever it appears.

Second, there is always someone who sees the truth -- find them. Yes, some of the people praising Jesus on Palm Sunday are the same ones shouting "Crucify him!" later in the week. But not all of them. Not Bartimaeus – the beggar with new sight, or Jairus' daughter – the little girl returned to life. Neither the

woman whose hemorrhage was stopped nor the lepers who were healed.

They know first-hand that Jesus is from God, even if their place on the margins make their voices too faint to rise above the shouts from the center. So, when the world turns upside down and the narrative of fear grows louder, look for those who recognize what is real. They are there – just not in the spotlight.

And third, God is always faithful. Yes, the clarity with which people knew Jesus on Palm Sunday becomes clouded as the week wears on. Even Jesus had doubt and felt forsaken. But God does not change and will never abandon us. The One who creates all things also restores all things. It is right to trust that God still dwells among us, that peace is possible and the world can be made whole. Resurrection is not here yet, but it is real. We know this.

So, we join the procession through Holy Week not because we understand everything that lies ahead, but because we know the character of the One who leads us. We follow with whatever clarity we have today, trusting that even when the road turns toward the cross, the life of God is still unfolding among us. Amen.