

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion
April 5, 2020
Philippians 2:5-11

“Deliver Us, Jesus, by Your Death on the Cross”

Palm Sunday looks and feels very different this year as we continue life under stay-at-home orders. And yet, just as surely as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, so he is riding into our homes and neighborhoods on this Palm Sunday. Even though we can't be together in person, waving our palm branches and shouting, **“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”** (Matthew 20:9), we can do this virtually, and we are doing this virtually. I hope you saw the link that we put out on our website (www.sjlc.com) to a creative idea about making a Palm Sunday door decoration from whatever green branches you may have at home. If you don't have palm branches close at hand (and who does?), then make this out of whatever is around you in your yard or garden. Put this on your front door as a sign and symbol to your neighbors that Jesus has come to your house. This might cause people around you to ask about what this door decoration is, and that becomes a bridge to conversations about faith. There is a wonderful home-based devotion available on our church's website that has something for each day during Holy Week (<https://community.findmynextstep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Shelter-In-Place-Holy-Week-Resource-from-Next-Step-Press.pdf>). Please print this off and let it be a blessing to you and others. Today, on this Palm Sunday, we enter into Holy Week and what is central to our Christian faith: the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The message for today, based on the Epistle lesson for Palm Sunday, is entitled “Deliver Us, Jesus, by Your Death on the Cross.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

During our midweek Lenten online services, week by week we have looked at different verses of the Epistle lesson that is appointed for today on Palm Sunday. There is a dual emphasis today: it is both Palm Sunday and the Sunday of the Passion. Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem amidst waving palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna!” We like Palm Sunday because it has a celebrative, joyful feel. But there is a transition that takes place in worship as Palm Sunday morphs into Passion Sunday. This moves us into *why* Jesus entered into Jerusalem: to suffer and die upon the cross. The mood in worship shifts from joyful celebration to somber reflection as we are confronted with the harsh reality that this is why Jesus was born: to give his life on the cross as the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. The word “passion” here does not mean feelings of great enthusiasm or desire, which is what we usually think of. The word “passion,” as it is used in this instance, traces its origins back to Latin (*passio, pati*), meaning to suffer. That is what's behind the extended reading that we call the Passion Reading, rather than the Gospel reading, on Palm Sunday: the account of Jesus' suffering and death. And we move toward this in the Epistle reading for Palm/Passion Sunday, which is the same each year: Philippians 2:5-11.

Right now, in the midst of the coronavirus, we're in uncharted territory. All of these shelter-in-place restrictions and closures are new. Nobody remembers what things were like more than 100 years ago with the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-1919. Whenever we are in uncharted territory, our anxiety level shoots up; we become nervous and fearful. We can endure just about anything as long as you know there is an end date in sight. And that's exactly what we don't have; there is no firm end date for all of this. And that is very hard to bear. In the midst of it all, we have a Savior who assures us: **“I am with you always, even to the end of the world”** (Matthew 28:20). Even when we are alone, we're not alone. Jesus himself is with us to encourage, strengthen, and bless us. And when each one of us faces that ultimate uncharted territory, which is death itself, even then we are not alone. **“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”** (Psalm 23:4a). Jesus delivers us from death through death – his death on the cross, just like that Scripture memory verse that we spoke together

tells us: **“And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”** (Philippians 2:8).

As we heard in that Passion reading from Matthew’s Gospel lesson, Jesus was taunted and mocked even while hanging on the cross and in unspeakable agony. The religious rulers hurled abuse at him even then: **“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now”** (Matthew 27:42-43a). And you know, they almost got it right. Jesus did indeed save others, including the thief on the cross, who confessed his trust in Jesus just before each of them died (Luke 23:42-43). But where the religious rulers got it wrong was in saying, “He cannot save himself.” The truth is that Jesus *would not* save himself. Rather than saving himself, he saved us instead. He did not save himself from rejection, condemnation, scourging, unimaginable suffering, and being cut off from God the Father. All this Jesus freely did for you and for me; for your sins and for mine; for the sins of the whole world. Jesus has indeed delivered us from death and destruction through his death on the cross.

In the city of Jerusalem is the ancient Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which tradition holds to be the place of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. The church was first built in the fourth century by Constantine the Great. This site is revered by Christians who come on pilgrimages from around the world to worship here. In light of the coronavirus, even this has been closed, along with houses of worship and public places around the world. Like all of us, fellow believers who would very much like to gather for worship during Holy Week and Easter at this special place are unable to do so. Although the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has been closed before for brief periods of time, the last time the church was closed indefinitely was more than 650 years ago in the year 1349 at the time of the Black Plague (<https://www.rt.com/news/484512-church-holy-sepulchre-closes-coronavirus-plague>). That is a sobering reality. But death is not the final word here. To be sure, our Easter celebration of resurrection and new life must first take us through the pain and death of Good Friday, but it cannot end there. We worship and serve a risen Savior who has brought life and immortality to light. And that is what we cling to, now more than ever. Death and the grave could not hold Jesus, nor can they hold those who belong to Jesus. That word most associated with Palm Sunday is “Hosanna,” and it means, “Save us.” That is exactly what Jesus has done: he has delivered us, he has saved us, through his death and resurrection.

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 20:9). Amen.