

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk

(Delivered on Palm/Passion Sunday, April 10, 2022)

Text: **Luke 19:28-40** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Intro: *As we begin Holy Week with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, we are also reminded that this is the beginning of Jesus' passion – the joyous shouts of "hosanna" will soon turn into shouts of "crucify him." As we prepare ourselves for all of the events of this week, let us hear these words from Luke's gospel, remembering that, even as Jesus feels the shouts of acclaim and celebration he is fully aware of the shouts of derision and great sadness that will also be a part of this holy week.*

(And) Jesus went ahead with the ascent to Jerusalem.

Approaching Bethphage and Bethany, near what is called the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of the disciples with these instructions: "Go into the village ahead of you. Upon entering it, you'll find a tethered colt that no one has yet ridden. Untie it and lead it back. If anyone should ask you, 'Why are you untying it?' Say, 'The Rabbi needs it.'

They departed on their errand and found things just as Jesus had said. As they untied the colt, its owner said to them, "Why are you doing that?"

They explained that the Rabbi needed it. Then the disciples led the animal to Jesus and, laying their cloaks on it, helped him mount.

People spread their cloaks on the roadway as Jesus rode along as they reached the descent from the Mount of Olives, the entire crowd of disciples joined them and began to rejoice and praise God loudly for the display of power they had seen, saying,

"Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

Jesus replied, "I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out!"

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:

"Through It All"

In these days filled with worry and concern where we continue to wonder when the next viral shoe will drop and whether we'll be able keep track of how many boosters we've had, and even whether we're on the brink of World War III. These times where every Facebook like seems to be followed by a nearly instantaneous Instagram putdown, I thought the focus of this Sunday as honoring both the triumphal entry of Jesus signified by the palms we've held in our hands today and the passion of the Christ which will be reflected on more deeply in our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services this week, was a powerful one for helping us to deal with the massive uncertainty in our lives and the experience we share with all of humanity both now and throughout history where we can be lauded and praised one day and shunned and humiliated the next.

I also thought this combining of both celebration and mourning can teach us how to live out all our days in ways that honor each moment and be aware of each moment in terms of not only how we're feeling, but what is happening within us both spiritually and emotionally and how we can use that awareness to draw closer to God and realize God's spirit walking beside us each step of the way.

As commentator Sharron R. Blezard informs us, it's a "recent liturgical phenomenon," this "compressing Holy Week into a single service on the Sixth Sunday of Lent, resulting in the hybrid Palm/Passion Sunday" we are experiencing today.

As I've read about the reasons for this compression over the years, it does make sense as to why it occurs this way. Many people won't be attending the mid-week services of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, not to mention Holy Saturday, which we UCC'ers pretty much ignore completely. That being the case, the crafters of the liturgical calendar realized that the Passion story could be skipped entirely by a majority of church goers. So, they figured they'd better go ahead and get ALL of it in on this Sunday before Easter so that Jesus's cleansing of the Temple, his Last Supper, his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, trial and crucifixion, were not given short shrift.

This makes for a tough call by a Pastor, mind you, as to just what to include and concentrate on in one tiny Sunday service. As I looked back through our past Palm/Passion Sundays together I noted that I mostly avoided the choice, concentrating instead on the other lectionary options which include the stunningly beautiful Psalm 118 "This is the day our God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" as well as the stirring words from Isaiah 50 which echo Christ's own journey, "I gave my back to those who struck me... I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."

And, yes, you may notice that, even today, I've decided to concentrate our study primarily on the Liturgy of the Palms and the celebration that precedes the suffering and agony of the Christ as we will be concentrating on the Passion this Thursday as we gather together at Montebello and then Friday as we consider Christ's final moments of his human life in a service here in our Sanctuary. The word Passion used in this sense comes from the Latin, by the way, meaning "to suffer, bear, and endure" from which, as Wikipedia tells us, also comes the word "patience."

However, just because we're not concentrating our study on the Liturgy of the Passion today, doesn't mean it isn't fully with us even as we place ourselves on the streets of Jerusalem, waving our palm branches and taking off our cloaks to make a personal pathway upon which Jesus can ride. For in the same way our lives can change on a dime, so the life of the Christ will change almost instantaneously after this parade passes by. The joy and celebration and honor offered to him and which surely must have been felt by him, will soon turn to agony and sadness and disgrace as he is betrayed into the hands of those who are threatened by him and want to see him dead. I have to wonder if the same voices that were

shouting out, “Hosanna, Blessed is He that Comes” turn on a dime themselves and shout only a few days later, “Crucify Him!”

“Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is royal, [and] triumphant, but we know how the people will turn against Jesus, even if the whole passion story is not read [today]” commentator Elisabeth Johnson notes. “We know that many in the crowds who hail Jesus as king on this Sunday will be crying out for his crucifixion by Friday. Perhaps they expected a mighty warrior-king who would drive out the Romans. Seeing Jesus held by Roman soldiers, weak and vulnerable, they will decide that he is not the king they want after all. In fact, supporting him could be downright dangerous.

“Where do we see ourselves in this story?”, she asks. “We have the advantage of 2000 [plus] years of hindsight, and it is easy to judge the characters in the story from a distance. But are we really so very different from them? How quickly does our faith falter when God does not deliver what we are expecting? How quickly does our discipleship falter when we realize the great cost and risks of following Jesus? How often do our self-serving instincts lead us to deny Jesus and his claim on our lives?”

“Luke’s passion story records a variety of human responses to Jesus,” she notes, “from faith and jubilant praise to mockery, hostility and violence. Yet throughout this story of vacillating human responses, of human blindness, weakness, and hardness of heart, one thing remains constant: God’s will to show mercy and to save. Without jumping ahead to the end of the story just yet, we can affirm that even in the midst of this human tragedy, God is at work for good.”

And that is the main point I want you to carry with you today, that through it all, every moment of our lives, whether it’s a moment filled with love and joy and contentment or it’s a moment filled with questioning and terror and torment, God is there beside us, helping us and letting us know that joy will come in the morning whether it’s on this side of the veil or the other.

Just as Jesus accepts and revels in the joy and adoration that is bestowed upon him on this celebratory day, so he accepts that which is to come upon him later this week - even as he pleads with his Abba in the garden to take the cup from him. In those moments of both great happiness and great despair can we remain as faithful, thanking God for the joy and thanking God for the sorrow, knowing that through it all God is surely there with us?

As I was studying and preparing for this Sunday, I came across an extraordinary poem by the great 13th-century Persian poet and theologian known as Rumi and I’d love to share his wisdom with you today as we continue our celebration and prepare ourselves for the week ahead. This poem was, in fact, the basis for me for all we’re exploring today.

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Amen.