

Matthew 21:1-11 *As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Normally, Palm Sunday is a festive day. People gather to celebrate with great joy Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We do a palm processional with the children for the opening hymn and everyone marvels at how cute they look as we march around. The singing is peppy and celebratory. But everything is different this year! You may not feel like singing, "Hosanna!" this year. You're there stuck worshipping at home and I'm here preaching to a virtually empty sanctuary. The world we live in is different. Traffic on the road is almost non-existent if you are able to get out. Businesses are shut down and have no activity. People keep their distance and stay far away from you. I haven't been offered a hand for a handshake for about 2-3 weeks now. It's all different! Easter and Holy Week are going to be different also. No getting together for worship. No Easter breakfast or egg hunts. No family gatherings. Everything is different. You may not feel overly triumphant today nor feel like singing praises this Palm Sunday.

But this theme of everything being different is really what the first Palm Sunday was all about. The people gathered on the sides of the road singing praises to Jesus and placing palm branches on the road before him had different expectations of who Jesus was and what he came to do than what was reality. Jesus turned out to be a much different king than what they were expecting. He turned out to fight a much different battle against a much different enemy than they were expecting. And truth is, this is great news for you and me. Because Jesus stayed the course to fight the spiritual battle against death and the devil and offer himself on Calvary's cross as payment for our sin, everything is different for us. We no longer are bound by sin and held captive by death and the devil. Everything is different now that we know God's love and the forgiveness he offers through Jesus our Savior. Everything is different and that's what brings us such joy and happiness despite the uncertainty around us. The good news for you and me is that while everything around us is going to be different this week, the message of Holy Week is going to be the same message you have always heard. How we celebrate Palm Sunday and Good Friday and Easter Sunday is going to change, but the message is still the same. We have a different world to apply this message to and may apply it to our own hearts in a different way, but the message hasn't changed! Because of Jesus, **Everything is Different!**

It is interesting to note how the people who gathered on that first Palm Sunday saw this entire picture different from reality. They recognized the prophecy from Zechariah being fulfilled as Jesus entered into Jerusalem on a donkey. They saw the signs from the Old Testament being fulfilled and truly worshipped Jesus as the Messiah sent from God to rescue his people. Yet, the truth is, they saw only what they wanted to see. They saw only what fit into their narrative of who the Messiah was going to be and what battle the Messiah was going to fight. There were plenty of signs that they should have seen this picture differently. They missed that fact that a king would not have rode a donkey into battle but a strong, powerful war horse. He would not have entered into the city he wanted to conquer all by himself but would have brought his army with him. He would not have appeared meek and humble but would have projected strength and power. If Jesus came to be the earthly king whom they were expecting who would fight against the Romans and free the people of Israel from under their power, these are the things that they should have been expecting. Everything about Jesus was different! Yet they allowed themselves to see only what they wanted to see and remained blind to the reality standing before them.

In reality, Jesus was exactly as Zechariah had foretold. He was not going forward to fight against the Romans. He was marching into Jerusalem to bring an end to the battle the devil had been waging against him and his people since the beginning and to secure spiritual and eternal freedom for his people. To do that required him to fight a different battle in a different way. Zechariah prophesied about a king who would be meek and who would take his throne not by power but by humility. Jesus' meekness and lowliness did not come out of weakness but out of necessity. This is what was required for him to be our substitute. To free us from the power of sin, death and the devil, Jesus had to submit himself to death, even death on the cross. He had to willingly endure the unjust trial, the intense suffering and even the full wrath of God in hell. Jesus humbled himself, that is, he gave up the full use of his divine power and glory, to submit himself to all of this because this is what was necessary for him to win salvation for all of humankind. This is the only way that Jesus could have won the victory he needed to win as our king—the victory over sin and death. Everything we see in this Palm Sunday account was different from what the people who were there were expecting...and this is the reason for our celebration. Jesus didn't follow popular opinion and wasn't swayed by pop culture to give the people what they wanted. He focused on the mission his heavenly Father had given him and set out to secure what all people of all time needed—rescue from their sins. And because Jesus did that, for us everything is different.

Sadly, there are many people today who look at Jesus and still see in him some things that are much different from reality. They focus on the problems that they face in the here and now and are tempted to want a Savior who can fight their battles in this present world. People want a Savior who can take away their suffering, give them a glorious life and miraculously supply such an overabundance in their lives that they could never want for anything again. They look for a Savior who will bring an end to their troubles, make their lives problem free and allow them to live pain free with joy and gladness. But that isn't reality. And when life turns out much differently than what their expectations are, they follow the same path of the Israelites in Jerusalem who shouted, "Hosanna!" on Sunday and "Crucify" on Friday. They were focused on the here and now and sought a Savior who would fight their battle in the present world. They weren't able to step back and see a different picture and see the reality of the battle Jesus came to fight. So they walked away in frustration, angry and disappointed that Jesus wasn't who they wanted him to be.

Palm Sunday gives us the chance to see Jesus differently...realistically. Palm Sunday reminds us of the bigger battle that we have to fight—the battle against sin and death. Focusing on the here and now and the problems we have in the here and now will only lead to frustration and disappointment. Many people are crying "Hosanna!" to Jesus today: Please save us! Save us from this virus. Save us from this quarantine. Save us from economic collapse. To them, this is the biggest battle they have to fight. When this doesn't end as quickly as they want or causes them pain and suffering, they will walk away from God frustrated and disappointed and even accuse him of being unloving and uncaring. How different that is from the Jesus we see on Palm Sunday! The biggest battle that we have to face is the one we can't win by ourselves—the battle against death. Jesus does love us and he does care about us. We see that love on display with his willingness to humbly and meekly go forward into Jerusalem to defeat death and the devil once and for all! This is what Holy Week is all about.

Yes, this Easter is going to be different from any other Easter you've had. Your worship routine will be different. You won't be able to travel or gather with family. You will have the economy on your mind along with worries of collapse and financial hardship. And Satan would have you focus on all these problems that are confronting you. He would seek to distract you from the spiritual strengthening God intends for you this week by focusing your attention on everything that is different. He will do everything he can do to distract you from the true meaning of what this week is all about. Don't let the devil distract you! We begin this Holy Week by reminding ourselves what Holy Week is all about. It's not about an earthly king who came to solve earthly problems. It's about God's love for you in sending a spiritual king to fight a spiritual battle and win salvation for you. Your celebration might be different this year, but that doesn't change Easter. Palm Sunday is a reminder to us of God's faithfulness. His plan was always forgiveness for his people and Jesus willingly went forward as our substitute to sacrifice himself for our sins. God's promises remain true. His love reigns and his word will be established on this earth. Pandemics cannot stop the Gospel of Jesus. Yes, this week most everything is going to be different from what you've ever known. I guess that fits. Because of Jesus and what we celebrate this week, for us everything is different, including our eternity. Amen.