

## **JOHN AND THE BOOK OF SIGNS**

### **(9) THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY**

John 12:12-19

Jeffrey S. Carlson

March 25, 2018

#### **SCRIPTURE**

<sup>12</sup>The next day, the news that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem swept through the city. A large crowd of Passover visitors <sup>13</sup>took palm branches and went down the road to meet him. They shouted, "Praise God! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Hail to the King of Israel!" <sup>14</sup>Jesus found a young donkey and rode on it, fulfilling the prophecy that said: <sup>15</sup> "Don't be afraid, people of Jerusalem. Look, your King is coming, riding on a donkey's colt."

<sup>16</sup>His disciples didn't understand at the time that this was a fulfillment of prophecy. But after Jesus entered into his glory, they remembered what had happened and realized that these things had been written about him. <sup>17</sup>Many in the crowd had seen Jesus call Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead, and they were telling others about it. <sup>18</sup>That was the reason so many went out to meet him—because they had heard about this miraculous sign. <sup>19</sup>Then the Pharisees said to each other, "There's nothing we can do. Look, everyone has gone after him!" (John 12:12-19 NLT).

#### **INTRODUCTION**

It was Palm Sunday but because of a sore throat, five-year-old Billy stayed home from church with a sitter. When the family returned, they were carrying several palm fronds. Billy asked them what they were for. "People held them over Jesus' head as he went by," his father told him. "Wouldn't you know it," Billy fumed, "the one Sunday I don't go and he shows up!"

What is Palm Sunday? Most Americans have no idea. Even regular church-goers struggle to define it. They remember it has something to do with waving palms and some sort of parade for Jesus when he entered Jerusalem. But beyond that they are hard pressed to say.

To further complicate matters, the day has multiple names. Perhaps if we look at each name in turn we might learn the significance of this day and why it still matters.

## **1. PALM SUNDAY**

The most common name for today is “Palm Sunday.” It commemorates an event found in all four gospels. John describes it this way:

The next day, the news that Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem swept through the city. A large crowd of Passover visitors took palm branches and went down the road to meet him (12,13).

Palm branches were originally connected to the Feast of Tabernacles but later became part of the other annual festivals including Passover. Distributing palms to welcome visitors was common – much like receiving a lei when visiting Hawaii today.

The waving of palm branches had an additional meaning. Since the days of the Maccabees, the waving of palm branches expressed a nationalistic zeal.<sup>1</sup> They were often used to celebrate military victories and probably stirred some political messianic hopes among the people.

The songs associated with Passover were well known by participants – much like carols are to us at Christmas. The words are found in Psalms 113-118. As Jesus came toward Jerusalem the crowd was singing:

“Praise God! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD!  
(13).

“Praise God” is a translation of Hosanna. Originally Hosanna meant “save us now” but over time became an expression of praise. So this is an accurate translation of Psalm 118. But after awhile, some in the crowd began to sing words not found in Psalm 118:

“Hail to the King of Israel!” (13).

People were giving voice to their expectations of Jesus. They waved their palms like we might wave flags at a campaign rally. The other gospels tell us that people even threw their cloaks on the ground as Jesus approached – an act associated with the greeting of royalty (see Mk 11:8-11).

So this was the first Palm Sunday. But should we still call it Palm Sunday today?

---

<sup>1</sup>The Maccabees liberated Judea from the Syrians (known at the time as the Seleucid Empire) and founded the Hasmonean Dynasty which ruled from 167 B.C. until conquered by the Romans in 37 B.C.

## **2. TRIUMPHAL ENTRY**

This day is also referred to as the Triumphal Entry. This is a popular alternative to calling it Palm Sunday. As we read the text it does appear that Jesus is being greeted like a conquering hero.

There are some who think this event was staged by Jesus. After all, he did arrange ahead of time to borrow a donkey (Mt 21:1-3). And it does appear to resemble something the Romans did that was called, interestingly enough, a triumph.

A triumph was initiated when a Roman general and his army returned to Rome and camped outside the city. A messenger was sent to tell the Senate of their return. The city would prepare to receive the army by setting up arches of triumph and decorating the streets with garlands. When the city was prepared to receive the army, trumpets would be blown, and the army would begin its march. Before the march began the citizens were invited to go out and join the general and his marching army that had fought and conquered in their name.

One little it'sy bitsy teeny tiny fact that seems to go against all of this is that there is no reference to Christians ever referring to Palm Sunday as the Triumphal Entry before the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, there is a type of triumph or victory present in this story that is represented by someone other than Jesus. I am talking about Lazarus.

The first twelve chapters of the Gospel of John (minus the introduction 1:1-18), is referred to as the "Book of Signs." A sign is meant to communicate a message. Jesus did not perform miraculous signs in order to entertain the crowd like a magician. The signs were intended to communicate something. They point to the identity of Jesus and the new kind of life he offers and thus lead to faith in the crucified and risen Lord.

The raising of Lazarus is the seventh and final sign in the Book of Signs. John mentions Lazarus five different times in chapter 12 and stresses three times that Lazarus was the one Jesus raised from the dead. So Lazarus represents victory over death. His presence is also the likely cause of the increased size and intensity of the crowd that went to see Jesus since the same crowd also wanted to catch a glimpse of Lazarus.

Many in the crowd had seen Jesus call Lazarus from the tomb, raising him from the dead, and they were telling others about it. That was the reason so many went out to meet him—because they had heard about this miraculous sign (17,18).

Should today be known as the Triumphal Entry rather than Palm Sunday?

### **3. PASSION SUNDAY**

Today is also called Passion Sunday. Whereas Palm Sunday recalls Jesus' celebrated entry into Jerusalem, Passion Sunday recalls the events that unfolded over the next few days, especially Jesus' suffering and death, events collectively named "the passion," a name derived from the Latin word meaning "to suffer."

At this stage in the narrative, the religious leaders no longer deny that Jesus has performed miraculous signs including the raising of Lazarus (11:47). But they are gripped by jealousy and fear. Jealousy because of the popularity of Jesus:

"If we allow him to go on like this, soon everyone will believe in him" (11:48a).

Fear because of the Roman reputation for violent reprisal when there was even a whiff of rebellion:

"Then the Roman army will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation" (11:48b).

A man named Caiaphas was High Priest. He convinced the council they needed to kill Jesus by telling them that one man should die to save the people (11:49). He had no idea how true his words would become. Jesus would die to save all people.

Jesus must have sensed where this was going. In Luke's Gospel we read:

But as they came closer to Jerusalem and Jesus saw the city ahead, he began to weep. "How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes. Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you from every side. They will crush you into the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you did not accept your opportunity for salvation" (Lk 19:41-44 NLT).

The second half of John's Gospel is called the "Book of Glory." It focuses on the passion of Jesus in chapters 13-19 and his resurrection in chapters 20 and 21. The Book of Glory builds on the Book of Signs. After Jesus entered glory through his death and resurrection, the promises of the signs were fulfilled.

Should today be known as Passion Sunday?

### **3. DONKEY SUNDAY**

Palm Sunday? The Triumphal Entry? Passion Sunday? What if we call it “Donkey Sunday?” Donkey Sunday? Yes, Donkey Sunday!

Jesus entered Jerusalem in a manner described as, "humble, riding on a donkey, riding on a donkey's colt" (Zech 9:9 NLT) – the fulfillment of the prophecies of Zechariah. Jesus' riding into the city on a young donkey was a sign of peace. He did not ride a war horse or carry a sword or wear a crown. Nor did he ride in on a wheeled vehicle, as was customary for ancient royalty. He deliberately rode a donkey. But the gesture was lost on the crowd bent on a Messiah who would be the rival of the Emperor in Rome.

Knowing what is ahead, we can appreciate all too fully the irony of Jesus' triumphal entry in Jerusalem. “Praise God” and “Hail to the King” becomes, in a few short days, "Crucify him!" The king they were expecting was not the king they got.

When I was a little boy I liked to travel with my Dad to our local landfill. That's because he let me search for “treasures” and if I found one that wasn't too big or too messy he let me take it home. One day I found a children's book. It told the story of an amazing man who helped people. But near the end of the book the tone changed. The very people he had helped rejected him.

The book was a children's book on the life of Jesus – popular in Sunday Schools in the 1940s. It was called “The King Nobody Wanted” – and I found it on a trash heap. But for me it remains a great treasure.

If Jesus had come to fulfill the earthly, nationalistic ambitions of the people he would have ridden a horse, as a warring liberator. But he came on a donkey – an honored animal in those days. He came as One who brings peace.

Shouldn't we call today “Donkey Sunday?”

### **5. CONFUSION SUNDAY**

Palm Sunday. The Triumphal Entry. Passion Sunday. Donkey Sunday. Of all the names and suggested names for this day, the one that speaks to me the most is, “Confusion Sunday.” Confusion Sunday.

The source for this idea creates even further confusion. It comes from the one saint mostly likely to be found problematic by Protestant Christians – Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuits (Society of Jesus) who, in their early days, led the Counter-Reformation. Ignatius was responsible, in part, for John Calvin fleeing France

for his life.

But it turns out Ignatius wasn't wrong about everything. In fact, he was right about a great many things including, I think, Palm Sunday. He told his followers that at the beginning of Holy Week they should always pray for confusion. This is because it is for our sins Jesus will die and we cannot embrace that fact with cold rationality, on the one hand, or complacent sentimentality, on the other. It should hit us like the proverbial 2x4 to the head.

Today we pretend to be the crowd which cheers Jesus. On Friday we will pretend to be the crowd which wants his blood. How are we supposed to feel? Joyfully-sad? Depressingly giddy? It is very confusing.

It is staggering to think that the God who created the universe could come so close to us that we could see him, smell him, touch him, and kill him. "Praise God" and "Hail to the King." So he was acknowledged on Palm Sunday; so we welcome him into our midst even today. For we know today what that first Palm Sunday crowd did not know – that he was coming to die for the life of the world. This story is not about palm branches but the palms and feet of the Savior. The hand that once held the universe was fastened to the Roman gibbet by a rusty nail. This is so difficult to grasp and even more so when we realize his purpose and motivation for doing it. He died that we might live and he did it out of love.

"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16 NLT).

This is the confusion of a great un-earned gift. This is the confusion of unconditional love. This is the confusion of sorrow turning into joy.

The world needs more such confusion. Let's do our part. Why not start today – on Confusion Sunday!