

“A Life in the Week”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Matthew 21:1-17  
April 14, 2019 - Palm Sunday

We do it every year, the waving of palm branches as the kids lead us in a march filled with *Hosannas*. But what a very strange thing for us to do!

We baptize with water because Jesus told us to baptize. We share the bread and the cup because Jesus did first and he told us to do so. But we don't have a record of him getting to Bethany and telling the disciples just before bedtime, “In the days to come, make sure you get palm branches every year and reenact today's parade.” We always talk about how these voices that shout “Hosanna” will either be silent or shout “Crucify him!” in just a few days — so why do we want to associate ourselves with this crowd?

This scene is surreal. In Matthew's version Jesus tells disciples to bring him both a donkey and a colt so he can somehow sit on both. And the people spread cloaks and branches on the road. Then they start shouting lines from the Psalms.

And thus begins one wild week for Jesus and his followers. It's a week full of ups and downs -- a real rollercoaster of actions and emotions. It's a week of the best and the worst, dizzying highs and terrifying lows and gut-wrenching middles. It's a week of presence and absence and fear and confusion and hope. What a week!

Now, listen folks, I have racked my brain, I have searched high and low, I have pondered and wondered, and I simply cannot come up with a sermon illustration to fit that description of a week.

In truth, most of us rarely have weeks that contain all of those ups and downs. But over the course of our lives we come to know most of those moments at some point. I wonder if that's why we like Palm Sunday so much. It stands as a chance to celebrate, while being very clear that the life of faith is a rollercoaster. Palm Sunday begins the week that captures our entire lives as we try to follow Jesus.

It begins with play and celebration.

Jesus is orchestrating an elaborate royal procession for his entry into the holy city. He comes in as a conquering king would, but he also connects it to the words of Israel's prophets. Imagine the excitement in Jerusalem as this spectacle unfolds before pilgrims making their way up for the Passover. You're preparing your family, herding the children, gathering what is needed for the holiday and all of a sudden a parade breaks out. It's street theater and messianic claim and political protest all wrapped into one.

It continues with a cry for help.

The crowds shout “Hosanna!” “Hosanna” was a worship word, with a deep meaning stretching back through tradition. Save us. Please. We are begging. The weight of the empire is on our shoulders. The weight of humanity is wearing us down. The weight of the daily struggle to live a life of meaning and substance is heavy. *Save us.*

Next comes a question, “Who is this?”

What does all this mean? Who does he think he is, causing all this excitement?

Then, there is confrontation.

Jesus enters the temple and turns over tables and drives out merchants. The temple is supposed to be a place where God's people can live as they are meant to live. For a moment Jesus reclaims it for prayer and for healing.

And so there is anger.

The children are shouting their Hosannas and the religious leaders don't like that. As Jesus teaches over the next days, with his perplexing parables of judgment and the kingdom of heaven, the leaders will question him and try to trick him and he will amaze the crowds and then weep over this holy city.

And then there will be plans hatched to arrest and kill him.

And while at a house in Bethany a woman will anoint him with the contents of an alabaster jar, an act of luxurious care in preparation for sorrow.

And Judas will slip out and find that thirty pieces of silver are his price.

As they share the Passover meal together, the knowledge of the betrayal will be heavy in the air as each says, "Surely not I."

And while that brokenness is in the room with them, Jesus will establish a new covenant in bread and cup, body and blood, a sacred promise, an enacted memory that carries through the centuries to us this morning.

He will take the disciples to the garden to pray. While they sleep, Jesus will wrestle with grief about the path he sees ahead of him. Another crowd will find them in the garden and, with a kiss, the betrayal is complete, and the desertion begins.

He will be brought before the high priest and then Pilate, and injustice will have its day. In the courtyard, Peter will deny knowing him. Judas will reckon with his guilt. And the crowds will yell, "Crucify him!" And mockery will precede violence. And on the cross he will cry out, "Why have you forsaken me?" And death will pierce the world and the women will keep vigil and all will seem lost.

And then there will be mystery and surprise and fear and great joy. For the details on that last piece, you'll have to come back next Sunday.

Joy bookends this week, and we are in a very celebratory mood at Edgewood Presbyterian Church.

Pastor Emeritus, Reverend, teacher, preacher, dear friend, mentor, father, husband — Sid — welcome home! We have been through a week that saw so much emotional energy poured out by so many who love you. In this congregation are children you have baptized and the parents and grandparents of those children. In this congregation are folks who only know you as a deeply kind retired pastor who shows so much interest in people that they can't help but be drawn to you. In this congregation are people you have joined in marriage and counseled through times of despair and walked with through the valley of the shadow of death, helping them -- yes, indeed! — helping them find their way.

In a time of confusion and fear and questions and despair, this congregation responded with hope and prayer and presence and the sacraments of casseroles and fried chicken. And when the word began to spread on Tuesday afternoon that Sid had been found, the joy shook the ground from the Randolph Trail Head to Ashridge to Jasper to Fultondale to Eugene, Oregon to this corner of Peerless and Oxmoor in Homewood. I have been telling people all week that I have never been a part of anything so

jubilant as the crowd of folks weeping and laughing and screaming and hugging at that trailhead. I cannot deny that some of us Presbyterians were Pentecostals, just for a few moments.

The Edgewood faithful popped corks and shared hugs up in Barron Hall. But you'd better believe we were going to party with palms out today.

And yet. We know what is to come for Jesus and his disciples before the dawn of Easter. We know that the joy bookends so many hard things. We are, in the end, good Presbyterians. And so we know that there are people who are just as beloved as our Pastor Emeritus, just as faithful and loving, just as committed to following Jesus, who did not get the miracle they prayed for this week.

We know what looms ahead. Our lives will see sorrow and confusion. We will know disappointment and broken relationship. We will be left alone at times. We will find tension and confrontation and be asked to stand up for the truth of the Gospel. We will continue to live in a world of violence and injustice. We will encounter despair. We will feel lost. We will weep.

And we will know joy beyond what we can imagine right now. There are events in the future that will surprise and delight us and ease the burdens of our complicated lives. There are people we have yet to meet and blessings of which we have yet to dream.

So much is before us — a years-long symphony with distinct movements and changes in tone. It can be overwhelming to consider, these days ahead. That's why we join together to worship, to check in with one another, to see what we can do to surround one another with God's grace. We do nothing alone. Anything we accomplish, we accomplish in community, with the help of God. Thanks be to God, because the week is too much to bear alone.

But today — today we dance in the streets. We cry "Blessed is the one!" and "Hosannah!" and "Thanks be to God! Today we rejoice. Today we hug and cheer and cause a ruckus that raises eyebrows. Today we give thanks that we are here and that we know hope and prayer and presence.

Today we follow Christ with joy. Even as we prepare our hearts for a wild week, we follow him with joy. Our souls awake and sing of the lamb, the lord of love, the lord of peace, the lord of years.  
Amen.