

The Way of the Palms

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a three-part series

April 1, 2012

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John 12:12–19 (NIV2011)

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the king of Israel!”

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

¹⁵“Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;

see, your king is coming,

seated on a donkey’s colt.”

¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!”

John 14:1–7 (NIV2011)

[Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion, i.e., at their last supper together.]

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ²My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

Palm Sunday. A day of celebration and joy. Yet, over it hangs the shadow of confrontation and the cross. Yet again, the question rings out: “Who is Jesus?!”

Last week, we saw Mary pouring astoundingly expensive across Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair. A burial anointing, Jesus calls it. He knows that his hour has now come. It is time for the last push, the final confrontations, and the cross.

But before the shadow of the cross falls fully across the story, John tells us of Jesus’ triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover. People shout and wave palm branches. We have grown so used to calling this day “Palm Sunday” we forget that only John specifically mentions the palm branches.

Who is Jesus?

This is the Palm Sunday question. It is the central question of John’s Gospel. It is the question to which all of John’s gospel has been driving us. It was the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. But it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The Palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God’s Messiah, his anointed one. In John’s brief telling of Jesus’ welcoming, the crowds shout “Hosanna,” which means

“save us” in Hebrew. They sing out “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel.” This is from Psalm 118, a song of God’s victory, the day when God has finally acted. The crowds expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King and that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has finally come to a head.

But John helps us to grasp that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John’s quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God’s people – very messianic in other words. But there is much more at work here than even the arrival of God’s Messiah.

John changes the opening words of the Zechariah quotation from “*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*” to “*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*” Here, John evokes

Why “Good” Friday?

I get this question often. It is certainly understandable.

The etymology of the “Good” here is not clear. Some think it comes from “God’s Friday.” Other scholars believe it simply derives from the German, *Gute Freitag*. But regardless of where the English term came from, the theology of “Good Friday” can be embraced by all Christians.

Calling it “Good Friday” acknowledges that out of the horrible tragedy of Jesus’ crucifixion came the greatest possible good – God’s victory over sin and death.

Standing at the foot of Jesus’ cross on Friday, it would have been impossible to see any good in it at all. Without Easter, Jesus’ story would have been a tragedy. The memory of his actions and teachings might have been cherished by his immediate followers, but he would have gone down in history as one of several well-meaning but failed messiahs in the first century.

But Jesus’ resurrection meant that he had triumphed over death and, because death was the consequence of sin, he had triumphed over sin as well. Jesus’ resurrection meant that God had acted in the present world to restore humanity and all of creation to a right relationship with himself. What could be a greater “good” than that?

Zephaniah 3: “¹⁵The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more . . . Do not fear, O Zion . . .”

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. God had once been their king and now God would be their king again: God incarnate in Jesus.

Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God’s departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn’t really any sign that God had returned.¹ The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God’s promise: “See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1).

What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on the next day, Jesus didn’t head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple.

The image of Jesus riding into the city is one that stirs our hearts, but let’s look ahead a few days to the evening when Jesus shares his last supper with his disciples.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life”

¹I don’t have the space to develop this, but here is the general idea. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land they were certainly still in jail, with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven. The coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God’s Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel. . . . That’s a lot packed into a few sentences, but this is a footnote after all!

After much trouble and tumult in the days after Palm Sunday, Jesus has finally come to the end of his long journey into the mouth of the beast. He has gathered his disciples together for one last meal together. He has washed their feet, sharing one last demonstration of the nature of God. And now, only hours away from arrest and crucifixion, Jesus seeks to reassure his disciples. He must go. And they cannot, they will not, follow.

Nonetheless, Jesus tells them to rest their troubled hearts. They can trust him just as they trust God. There are many rooms where Jesus is going and he will prepare a place for each of them. They may not realize it, as Thomas doesn't, but they already know the way to the place where Jesus is going . . . to heaven, the place where Jesus will be reunited with them as they await the great resurrection.

Jesus is the way to this place, this paradise: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." There is no other way, no other path, only Jesus: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is now unambiguously clear about his identity with the Father: "If really you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In other words, when they disciples have seen Jesus, they have seen God!

Thomas à Kempis

a 15th century monk and author of *The Imitation of Christ*

Follow thou me, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Without the way there is no going;
without the truth there is no knowing;
without the life there is no living.

I am the way which thou must follow;
the truth which thou must believe;
the life for which thou must hope.

I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth; the never ending life.

I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.

If thou remain in my way thou shalt know the truth,
and the truth shall make thee free,
and thou shalt lay hold on eternal life.

There's something very important to notice about exactly what Jesus says. It is not his way that he is talking about – he *is* the way. He isn't speaking here of living as he lived or loving as he loved – Jesus *is* the way. Just as Jesus is the gateway for the sheep (John 10), he is the path to this place we call heaven.² Jesus is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God.

For the last couple of centuries, Jesus' simple and profound statement, "No one comes to the Father except through me," has been endlessly controversial. How arrogant! How exclusive! How divisive! Yet, Jesus' claim and the early Christians' claims about him are made abundantly clear in John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If this is truly the truth, if it is "true truth," how could one claim to know God and yet disown Jesus?

When we begin to talk about the Christian truth claims in comparison to other religions and belief systems, the questions always boil down to this: Who is Jesus? As we embark on our journey through Holy Week, we reflect and pray upon the salvation that is Good Friday and the proof that is Easter Sunday. Therein lies the truth about Jesus.

² Jesus will call this place "paradise" when he speaks the next afternoon to a brigand on the cross next to his own (Luke 23:43).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Our Connection Groups have been watching segments of the film, *The Gospel of John*, each week. The story of Palm Sunday begins at 1:43:15 and ends at 1:44:49.

In his brief telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, John wants us to see that the crowds rightly welcome Jesus as a king, as God's anointed. But he also wants us to see that the crowds do not understand how God's work to redeem them will move forward. They can't imagine that in a few days, this humble donkey-riding Messiah will be dead on a cross. There was *zero* expectation of a suffering Messiah. They think they know what their problem is and how to fix it (a warrior King) – but only because they were listening to the world, not to God.

- When we welcome Jesus into our congregation, into our lives, what do we expect?
- Are we really ready to embrace Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life?”
- We Americans are a pragmatic lot. We want to know how to fix what is wrong. Our theology too often devolves into “if it works, it must be true.” But is this all there is to the Gospel?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, John 12:12-50 Jesus enters Jerusalem as the triumphant returning king, using OT images and references to stake his messianic claims.	Tuesday, John 13 Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for what is to come. Why do you think he uses foot-washing? Why don't the disciples stop Judas?
Wednesday, John 14 This chapter begins Jesus' last and longest discourse. How would you summarize what Jesus has to say about (1) where he is going and (2) the promise of the Holy Spirit?	Thursday, John 15:1-16:4 What does the image of Jesus as the true vine and we as the branches convey to you? What does it mean to abide in Christ? What does Jesus mean when he says it is better to be hated by the world than to be loved by it?
Friday, John 16:5-33 How could Jesus' going away possibly be to the disciples' advantage (16:7)? How is it that the disciples' sorrow will turn into joy?	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John

We meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Paul and the Galatians

We meet from 6:45 to 8:00 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages. The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

On April 1, Palm Sunday

*From Palms to the Cross:
The Story of Jesus' Last Week*

Beginning April 15

What the Bible Really Says About the End Times