

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday  
April 13, 2025  
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Frazier  
Luke 22:14-23:56

Palm Sunday is unique among all Sundays. There is an additional liturgy and ceremony added to the beginning of the service, and it begins in an out of the ordinary place. This Sunday is the only one when the whole congregation takes part in the procession. Everybody gets to carry something, not just the acolytes and choir. The Gospel reading is so long that we break it up into parts so that Jon or I don't have to read the whole thing and so that we can capture a bit of the drama.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, and we celebrate Passion Sunday. These used to be observed on two different Sundays when I was a lad, but now they are combined, meaning that we cover in some detail, most of the events of Holy Week all on this one day. And in the short while that we have been together so far this morning, we have experienced a great reversal from the celebration and parade-like atmosphere of Palm Sunday to the tragic, sorrowful events of the Passion.

And Jesus experiences a great reversal as well. He goes from being the triumphant king, cheered on by all the common people of Jerusalem, to the criminal, jeered at and convicted of the crimes of blasphemy and sedition. One day he is being greeted with palm branches waving and hosannas shouted, and then just a few days later, he is on trial and being condemned to die.

Jesus has shown himself to be the Son of God to those who needed his compassion and healing touch, but he is not the kind of king that exercises power by dominating his people, his followers. Instead, he comes as a servant, as Paul reminds us, ready to lay down his life for his friends and whoever comes to him in need.

The crowd in Jerusalem goes through a reversal. It is easy for humans to get caught up in big events and it is a crowd that makes an event big. The crowd on Palm Sunday is there to greet the Messiah, God's anointed king, sent to deliver the people of God from subjugation and the tyranny of the Roman Empire. They shout Hosanna! Which means "Save us we pray!" People in crowds like to wave things, and somebody thought palm branches were the thing. They carpeted the road with their cloaks to honor the king who was coming in the name of the Lord.

The same crowd, within days, turns fickle as crowds often do, and after Jesus is arrested and put on trial before Pontius Pilate, they reverse their opinion of Jesus and call for his crucifixion. It is the crowd, whipped up by Jesus's enemies, who drive the events toward the cross.

Peter goes through reversals in a most dramatic way. When Jesus asked his disciples, who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of God!" Peter was chosen to witness Jesus's transfiguration, he was the leader and spokesman of the group. After Jesus is taken prisoner by the temple guard, Peter, no doubt fearing for his life, abandons Jesus and claims to have

never known him. Instead of leading Jesus's disciples, he seeks to blend into the fickle crowd of onlookers, denying Jesus three times.

Even Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor gets caught up in reversals. History paints Pilate as a particularly brutal Imperial official, he had a fondness for crucifixions as a way to execute offenders and also to intimidate and humiliate the Jewish people. But in the Passion story, Pilate declares Jesus innocent three times. Pilate, the iron-fisted ruler, is overwhelmed by the power of the crowd and bends to their will.

Two characters in this drama actually reverse and turn toward Jesus: the one thief who defends Jesus and asks for his mercy, and the centurion who stood at the foot of the cross and realized that Jesus is the Son of God. They both were able to look on Jesus and see the love that he poured out despite being tortured and put to death.

The cross itself was reversed on the day Jesus was hung on it. What had been a symbol of punishment, brutality, oppression, and death, is now a symbol of the righteousness of Jesus. The cross was used by Rome to crush opposition to the empire, now it was to become a symbol of the love of Christ and his sacrifice for the sake of a sinful and broken world. Before this day, the cross was used to take away life, now the cross was a sign of life-giving love.