

Reversals of Fortune, a **Palm/Passion Sunday** sermon in response to Luke 19:28-40 and Luke 23:1-49 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, April 14, 2019. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

Palm Sunday has got to be one of the most joyous days of the year! We all get these cool palm branches to wave around, the children are excited and get a chance to march around the sanctuary (who doesn't love a good march!), and it's really the only time of year when the word-of-the-day is "Hosanna!!" ... It's Springtime! ... We've got egg dye and chocolate coming up in just a week's time. ... And, most of us have already broken open the jellybeans and started picking through our favorite colors. +++ What's *not* to like about this day? +++ And, it **seems** like that kind of day for Jesus, too, doesn't it? +++ +++ Imagine **you're** there – on the path from the Mount of Olives into the city – to welcome Jesus. +++ As he comes into town, you join a whole **multitude** of people who "began to praise God – **joyfully** – with a loud voice – for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, 'Blessed is the **KING** who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!'" +++ +++ You are jostled in the joyous crowd – everyone so excited to see Jesus making his grand entry... +++ If the Gospel could end **there** – it seems – it would truly be a happy ending:: **Jesus**,... welcomed into the Holy City as a **conquering king**. And you are there for it – watching and participating.

But now, you **do** see **something** happening that's a little worrisome. Looking through the crowd, you see a small group of the Pharisees complaining to Jesus about something. You maneuver through the crowd and get close enough to hear them say... "Order your disciples to stop' all this shouting and celebrating." But Jesus has a good answer:: "If **these** were silent, the **stones** [themselves] would shout out." +++ Oh yeah! Score **another one** for Jesus – those Pharisees **never could** get the best of him in an argument! +++ And the parade keeps moving... But then (as the day continues beyond our reading), there really *does* seem to some kind of problem – maybe the situation actually **is** more complex – less festive – than you thought at first. +++ You see Jesus look at Jerusalem, and all the joyous people gathered there, and he **begins weeping for them**. He cries, "If **only** you had **recognized**... the things that make for peace." ... You can't hear everything but he's saying something about Jerusalem being destroyed by **enemies** – that you'll all be crushed into the ground, **including your children!** All because you didn't recognize your visitation from God." +++ What in the world is **THAT** all about ??!!!!?? +++ **Then**, Jesus goes to the temple and drives out everyone who's selling things there. And suddenly, it looks like the chief priests, the scribes, and other leaders are looking for a way to **kill** him. +++ +++ **WHAT HAPPENED??** +++ How did everything change so much, so quickly? How was there such a **REVERSAL OF FORTUNE?** +++ **And, it's not over yet...** Over the few days, you see this same **Cheering** crowd become a **Jeering** mob demanding his crucifixion. ... +++ A Passover meal ends with disturbing predictions of things that are about to happen... +++ And an anguished personal prayer in a garden is interrupted by an arrest – violence – and worse. +++ Such Reversals of Fortune...

As that person on the street – it's got to make you think that **maybe** things weren't as perfect as you *thought* when everyone started shouting Hosanna and waving Palm Branches. **Maybe** Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem was an important **part** of the story, but it **wouldn't** have been such a good time to end the Gospel, after all – because there were still unresolved problems just below the surface. +++ You don't understand:: they shout that Jesus **IS** the king they've been waiting for... but then **he** cries because they DON'T see what he **really** is. +++ **There's something deeper going on** – something **no one** sees yet because they're so busy cheering for this new "king."

+++++

In some ways, Luke paints a picture of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that looks a lot like the lives we see meticulously constructed today on Social Media. "Trend Setters" or "Influencers" on Instagram – with carefully crafted – *beautiful* – personas – (that often have very little to do with who they *really* are). ... Lives chronicled on Facebook that seem filled with nothing but parties, pets, love, and adventure. +++ To see it, you'd think we all have perfect lives – if life is measured by the pleasures and comforts of **this** world. +++ +++ But that couldn't be further from the truth:: In the past 30 years, problems with addiction, depression, and anxiety have grown more and more prevalent – for teens, college students, and adults. In an article in Psychology Today, Dr. Jean Twenge

argues that's because our relationships and community ties are weaker; we're more focused on goals like money, fame, and image; and our expectations from life are often unreasonably high – much more than we can achieve. +++ There's a disconnect between what we value – what we aspire to – what we think we need +++ – and what is healthy for us – what we really need. It's a disconnect we can't resolve for ourselves – and so we turn to relief wherever we can find it. +++ +++ +++ The people gathered to welcome Jesus that day were also filled with anxiety. Anxiety about Rome dominating every aspect of their lives... – Anxiety about their own religious leaders pushing them and judging them. +++ They are at a breaking point and they to turn somewhere for relief ... – when, suddenly, their Messiah shows up: someone whom they expect will change all that – and they know just what he should do first, after marching into Jerusalem with a small army of followers... Hosanna, indeed! “Blessed *IS* the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” +++ Life is finally about to get better!...

+++++

From your vantage point, if you had been there that day – and through the following week – you'd see the streets full of people whose hopes had been crushed – *again*. ... People who had not listened – who failed to recognize their visitation from God. Their all-conquering king had turned out not to be so all-conquering – at least not in ways they expected – in terms of this world. +++ But, Christ HAD come to save them – and still could, if only they would give up their worldly expectations – if only they would repent – and truly follow him. +++ But they will not – and you will see them take their disappointment out on him. +++ As the week progresses, in a Reversal of Fortune, the story of Palms will become the story of Passion:: both parts of the same story all along – both parts of Christ's journey to the Cross. +++ Loud shouts of “Hosanna!” will become loud shouts of “Crucify Him!” +++ Confusion and emotions rise to such a fever pitch that Jewish women in the crowd will burst into uncontrolled weeping as he makes his way through the streets with the cross (Jesus calls these women “Daughters of Jerusalem,” and we'll talk more about them at our Good Friday service).

+++++

So, here on Palm Sunday, as we welcome Jesus Christ by waving our palm branches and shouting “Hosanna,” we should take a timeout to ask *ourselves*: Why? +++ He came to Jerusalem for a *reason* – and we'll walk through it together this week – exploring the Last Supper and his arrest on Maundy Thursday – his trial and crucifixion on Good Friday – and we'll gather to see what happened on Easter Morning. You can also turn to personal, prayerful, meditation this week. Our new Prayer Labyrinth will be prepared for you to come Wednesday and Saturday in the late afternoon and evening – inviting you in the midst of your busy life, to find solace in Christ, to be still and focus your thoughts and your feelings – aligning yourself with him – and taking time to let Holy Week seep into your soul. +++ And through it all, through the Easter Season and beyond, I encourage you to challenge yourself with these questions: Why did I show up for this? +++ Today. It's a question the people of Jerusalem didn't have a good answer for... Why did I show up for this? +++ What do I expect Christ to do for me? +++ What do I need from him? +++ Am I hoping he'll somehow fix all my relationships – ... help me get that next promotion – ... make my troubles go away? +++ Or, +++ am I here on his terms? +++ Am I ready to walk him to the cross, to receive the gift of his life, given to me, and the world, in love?

There are so many *Reversals of Fortune*, here as Holy Week begins. +++ The Good News is Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem is inseparably linked to the pain of his death –... then the glory of resurrection. Palm Sunday only has meaning because it leads to Good Friday – and then to the eternal victory that is Easter. +++ So, when we wave our palms today, let us look beyond history – let us look forward – to Christ leading us into the NEW Jerusalem, in the Kingdom of God, where *he will* reign as King forever.

+++++

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.