

Celebrate! The King is Here!

Sermon for Palm Sunday

Sermon Text: John 12:12-19



The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” ¹⁴ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ¹⁵ “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” ¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about Him and had been done to Him. ¹⁷ The crowd that had been with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸ The reason why the crowd went to meet Him was that they heard He had done this sign. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him.”

I once tried to tear off a branch from a palm tree and, believe me, it’s hard work! The branches of a palm tree are fibrous and tough. It takes a lot of tedious work, injured fingers, and plenty of time to tear off such a branch. That’s why I know that when the people in Jerusalem back then scattered palm branches on the road and began shouting, they didn’t just do it out of boredom. Something pretty big had to happen to start such an activity. Some of the Gospel writers even reported that the people spread not only palm branches on the road, but also their cloaks! There was a reason the people of Jerusalem at that time were excited. We must think about what happened earlier so that we can understand why the people did something so crazy. Not long before this, Jesus had called His dead friend, Lazarus, out of the tomb. In front many people, the stinking grave cloths were ripped from his body so that he could see the light of day a second time and could chat with Jesus and his friends as though nothing had happened. Anyone who has seen something like that can now truly tear branches from palm trees without a problem and shout as loudly as possible. But the question is what they cried out. In our Gospel text it says: Hosanna! That means: Lord, save us! Jesus doesn’t fend the people off. Nor does He get off the donkey to beat them with a whip for acting in such an unruly way. No! He allowed it all because the people were right. Jesus is the Messiah who came to help. Anyone who can call the dead out of tombs must be able to clean up pretty much all the problems in the world, right? I think we can and may also expect Jesus to help. This title of “Savior” already specifies what Jesus’ agenda is – He wants to save us! So we can all line up and tell this Jesus what He should save us from. There are so many crises where people urgently need help. For one, they need help with taking an important exam. For another, they need help with a life-threatening operation or a terrible illness. Another must stand trial in court again. Others have difficult financial worries or trouble in their marriage. There is a long list of complaints that we must carry with us. And we still have yet to talk about the huge crises in world events. Our world truly appears to be out of whack so much that we can all loudly call out together: “Lord, save us!” In Jerusalem at that time, there were surely enough reasons to call out “hosanna” and “Lord, save us.” For one thing, the people were oppressed by foreign rule. And the people in Jerusalem were strongly convinced that God would send someone just like Jesus who would free them from the Romans. Many listened to Jesus’ sermons and Jesus Himself spoke about God’s kingdom, even in the prayer He taught us, it says: “Your kingdom come!” For the people of Jerusalem back then, a political kingdom was undoubtedly what they had in mind. But did they have the vision of the kingdom of God that Jesus would bring? Do we also understand what Jesus brings to us and what He wants to save us from? Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: “God doesn’t fulfill all desires, but He fulfills all promises!” And the question to ask is this: Can we walk with Jesus even if things don’t go according to our will and if He doesn’t rescue us from every need? Jesus went to Jerusalem to help! Jesus comes to us today to help and save, too. Jesus doesn’t just want to help – He wants to save us. He wants to save us from our worst enemies and the terrible problems that stand before us. So let’s go with Him to Jerusalem! When I go with Jesus, I see the deep conviction in His eyes. There has never been anyone in the whole world who has gone on his way with such conviction like this Jesus. His eyes were focused directly on Golgotha. In the entire

history of the world, there was no one who has his path mapped out before Him so precisely, as this Jesus. No one has walked such a straight path as this Jesus. Our Lord Jesus is not a revolutionary who, after a failed coup, allows Himself to be transformed into a peaceful do-gooder. With Jesus, we look in vain for a secret Plan B or Plan C or Plan D... But there is only one plan and that is Plan A. This Plan A leads to the cross on Golgotha. This was already decided long before the journey to Jerusalem. Long before this, Jesus proclaimed, among other things: **“the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life.”** (John 3:14b-15) The people in Jerusalem who called out, “Lord, save us!”, expected something completely different. Surely, they at least expected Jesus to look good! But most of all, they wanted Him to let loose His power and finally bring order to our world. “Lord, save us!” they called out. And He helped them. He helped them by going to the cross. Plan A is the path to the cross. This is also God’s plan. If we want to get to God, that only happens through Jesus. No matter what we want from Jesus – we will always find Him only on Golgotha because He helps and saves us there more than anywhere else! On the cross, Jesus is the one who helps in that He bears the sin of the whole world. That was and is His plan A! When I see my Jesus on the cross, I see the sins of the whole world weighing on Him. Then I can’t help but join in and say, “That is for me too!” The sins of the world that stick to Him are also my sins. The view of the cross is very realistic and without masking or acting. Looking to Golgotha is the most personal view into my soul that I could have. No matter what else Jesus did, one thing is certain: He bore the pain of the cross for **me**. We want things to be different. We don’t want to go down the path to Golgotha. We would much rather place Jesus on a pedestal, keep Him really clean, and just hang a cross around our neck while politely saying Hosanna! If we keep Jesus clean from the cross, then the story of Jesus remains just that – a story. A story about a nice man who lived 2000 years ago. We can live according to His example and build a Christian culture that makes our world a little bit better than it is now. But Jesus didn’t just want to change human history a little bit. Just as He didn’t want to make a small group of Jews in Jerusalem happy, He also didn’t want to make our world and our culture the tiniest bit better just because of His example. He wanted more! He wanted to celebrate the victory over sin, death, and the devil. By going to Jerusalem, He wanted to prepare a path for us to heaven.

Hosanna and Lord, save us! the people cried out at that time. No sooner did they do that than a dark undertone came into play. The loud sounds of rejoicing and singing with palm branches was surrounded with the sound of the Pharisees: *“You **see** that you are *gaining nothing*. **Look**, the world has gone after Him.”* We know how the story goes. The dark voices in the background became even louder. In the end, the people will change their tune and cry out the words, “Crucify Him!” In the end, the one who called Lazarus out of the tomb is Himself carried into a tomb. In fact, the experience of Christ always has both tones: cross and glory. That’s how Jesus established the Church. And in the same Church, both tones can always be heard. Through baptism, we are all baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are buried with Jesus and will rise again with Him. Jesus overcame the cross and death to new life. He went before us. In death, as in life, He went before us.

When I look at it this way, I can only say: It’s a good thing that it didn’t end with Palm Sunday. How wonderful that we can also see Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in addition to Palm Sunday. How wonderful that a great resurrection is ahead of us. When I see and hear this... I could tear off palm branches. Amen.