

The Palm Sunday Test

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PALM SUNDAY

As many of you know, Bruce grew up in a Lutheran church and then helped start a Charismatic church. I grew up in a Charismatic church with a Lutheran pastor. Our church had a very curious mixture of tradition and novelty. To this day, one of my favorite childhood memories is Palm Sunday.

Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. A huge crowd welcomed him as a king, and placed palm branches on the road before Him.

- It was the 1st century way of rolling out the red carpet.

Because there's a shortage of palm branches in the Northwest, our church used sword ferns. Everyone would take one and wave it around as we sang. The kids got to march around.

And it gives me a warm, nostalgic feeling knowing that this morning over in Silverdale they are waving ferns and singing.

THE FICKLE CROWDS?

The part of the Palm Sunday story that has always bothered me, was what that same crowd that laid down palm branches and shouted "Hosanna" did five days later on Good Friday:

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas [to be freed] and to have Jesus executed.... "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" *Matthew 27:20, 22-23 NIV*

What happened? They gave Him a king's welcome and now demanded His blood. How do you go from "Hosanna" to "Crucify" in five days?

Some say they were fickle, caught up in the emotion of the moment. I don't buy it. It's too cartoon-ish, and it doesn't fit human nature.

It's also too easy to dismiss. It's easy for me to say, "If I had been there, I would have been loyal to Jesus." I'd really like to believe that, but I am not sure I would have done anything different.

IS HE OR ISN'T HE THE MESSIAH?

You see, Jesus, or Yeshua, as He would have been called, wasn't the first "messiah" they'd seen - you could list off a dozen others, all of whom had been executed by the Roman overlords.

Granted, this guy's a little different. For one, there have been rumors of miracles. And He teaches with such authority, like nothing you've ever heard.

But he does something no one can ignore: In front of a crowd of people, He raises Lazarus from the dead! Not since the days of the prophet Elijah had stuff like this happened, and now it's happening in your lifetime!

And now you get your hopes up. Maybe this is the guy, the Messiah, the anointed one who would set Israel free. You go to check Jesus out. And so:

...a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was [in Bethany] and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. *John 12:9 NIV*

Everyone wonders: What is He going to do now? What's His next step?

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. *John 12:12 NIV*

Thousands upon thousands are in Jerusalem for the Passover, and they've all heard what is happening. A sense of anticipation sweeps over the crowd. Is this it? Has the Messiah come?

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, just like the prophet Zechariah foretold:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey.... *Zechariah 9:9 NIV*

The crowd erupts. This is it! The King has come to save his people from the Romans! After hundreds of years of oppression, God is finally making good on His promises.

They 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!" *John 12:13 NIV*

The city was on the edge of a revolt. Here is the true king. He will lead them in victorious battle against the Romans.

But what Jesus did next was no less astounding. He went to the temple and cleaned it out as if it were His house!

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'" *Matthew 21:12-13 NIV*

The crowd knows His next stop; He'll march on the Antonia Fortress, the Roman barracks. It will be just like the days of old; God will miraculously destroy the Romans. This is it!

But Jesus just goes back home. And so you wait. And wait. You are confused (Did Jesus chicken out?), then disappointed (Nothing's changing), and then you are angry (Feeling betrayed).

Then comes the fear. You're sure the Romans will punish Jerusalem for Sunday's demonstration. How many will suffer because of this false messiah? What are we going to do? How could we be fooled again?

And so on Friday morning, when the priests tell you that Jesus is another pretender and that Lazarus' resurrection was just a staged trick, it is a simple choice to make Jesus the scapegoat. He can take the Roman's punishment.

- And so you shout "Crucify!"

THE PALM SUNDAY TEST

Q: Are you sure that you would have done any different?

Q: Have you ever felt like God has failed you?

You were in desperate need of God's help, for yourself or someone you love. You pray fervently, rolling out the red carpet, inviting Jesus to come and help.

- But instead of coming in and making everything right, He seems to just disappear.

Palm Sunday was a day of hope and expectation, and Easter brought God's salvation. Between them lies a test, Palm Sunday's test. It tested the crowds, it tested the disciples, it tests us:

- What do you do when God doesn't come through the way you expect?
- What do you do when He leaves you confused, discouraged, or angry?

Here's the thing: I don't think God is threatened, or even upset by our confusion, disappointment, or anger. The Bible is full of saints who got angry with God. But what do you do next?

- Do you shout "Hosanna" by trusting Him even in the trials?
- Do you shout "Crucify" by rejecting His plans, judging His timing, and questioning His character?

This is Palm Sunday's test. There's three common forms it takes:

1. The Confusion Test: Do we trust His plans?

Q: Have you ever wanted something so bad, and you were sure it was God's will, but you didn't get it?

Q: How do you feel? Confused.

When Marilyn and I set out to buy our first house, we found a nice place with some property that I really wanted. I was sure it was God's will. I prayed for it every night.

My dreams were filled with ways we could make the financing work. It's fixer upper, we'll have sweat equity. We can parcel off some of the land to pay for repairs.

But no matter how hard I tried to make it happen, the deal fell through. And I felt confused, frustrated. Why can't I have it God? Don't you love me?

- I don't care if it isn't your perfect will for me; I want it!

Looking back I am so thankful He stopped us from getting it. Sweat equity? Yeah, right! I hate to work on our house! Do you have any idea how long it takes for a sink to get unclogged in our house?

- Until Marilyn fixes it!

Our perspective is so limited. We can only see "dimly, through a mirror." God doesn't expect us to understand, but He does want us to trust His plans.

2. The Disappointment Test: Do we trust His timing?

I've frequently heard that God always answer our prayers, either with a yes, no, or wait. But I think there are times He doesn't answer and we wait years until we hear a response.

Our trust can be severely tested in that in-between time, from when we ask to when He answers. We want our answers now, and when God seems silent, there a deep disappointment.

- But time has and will always show God's timing is perfect.

3. The Anger Test: Do we trust His character?

And finally, there are times when His answers seem so wrong, so unloving and unjust. In these times, our faith in His character is deeply tested.

If I'm honest, there are times I cannot understand God's actions or seeming lack of action. But I choose to trust His character.

I fall back on the knowledge that I know Him to be good, loving, and just, so I trust in Him, even when He doesn't seem to be.

- Will you trust His character in the midst of pain?

Next week, Bruce will tell us about the victory of Easter, but we don't always feel victorious. It is good to remember that Palm Sunday's test proceeds Easter Sunday's triumph.

- Will you trust His plans even in your confusion?
- Will you trust His timing, even in your disappointment?
- Will you trust His character, even in your anger?