

**April 2, Palm Sunday A** (Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11)

## **In the Palm Sunday narrative, all the signs are there: something big is about to happen.**

by [Brian Maas](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue

[\*Read the author's reflection on Passion Sunday.\*](#)

One doesn't need to be an especially astute observer or pious participant in the local congregation to know that this Sunday is coming. Even those who've not been around since Christmas know what it means when they show up at church and there's purple on the altar, or there are midweek worship services on the calendar, or the neighborhood parish is hosting weekly fish fries. Soon there'll be bulletin announcements about purchasing lilies. And then worshipers are issued a palm frond and invited to wave it during a real or symbolic procession denoting Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Similarly, one didn't need to be an especially pious resident of Jerusalem on the day of that entry to recognize what it means that a reputed prophet is making his way into town on a donkey (*and* a colt!) while people shout "Hosanna!" and lay coats and palm branches in his path. Knowing the Psalter, as many faithful residents did, the symbolism of Psalm 118 cannot be missed.

As our purple paraments are cues to us of what's to come, so the broken branches and hosannas alert the residents of Jerusalem to an unfolding reality. Something big is about to happen.

Reading the appointed verses of Psalm 118, it's impossible to miss the gratitude resounding throughout—and equally impossible to miss who it is that's active in these verses. In the NRSV, the title "Lord" appears ten times; when "God" and related pronouns are included, the count nears two dozen. It is the Lord who is acting, and the grateful people who are responding. Something indeed is about to happen.

This is the background to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem; those who are present read the signs of the palm branches and the donkey and colt and know that God is up to something. The "Hosanna!" shouts aren't just spontaneous utterances; they're quotes from the psalm (*Save us, we beseech you!*). God is up to something in their very presence; something for which the faithful have prayed for centuries. For the crowds, this isn't just about Jesus. The God of the cosmos is up to something among the chosen people, and they want to be part of it. This is a production of the Lord, a production in which the man Jesus has a starring role, but a production with implications far beyond him—cosmic implications.

Of course, in the same way that violet vestments mean nothing to some in our congregations, there are those in Jerusalem to whom this palm parade is simply confusing. Hence, Matthew tells us, "the whole city was in turmoil." There are those who miss the meaning of the event, who are unfamiliar with the larger narrative, who simply want to know, *Who is this? What kind of a person can inspire people to such unusual behavior?*

The people of Jerusalem were not, after all, unused to notable entries into their city. In fact, the same week that Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east on his humble mount(s), Pontius Pilate arrived from the west—mounted on a horse, a steed appropriate for the wealthy and powerful. People would have responded to his arrival as well, though not with prayers to God nor with shouts of joy and demonstrations of praise. Their responses would have been the actions of the intimidated, threatened, and frightened. No one would want to draw the attention of this earthly authority nor feel his displeasure.

It's no wonder the city is in turmoil. Half the people are wondering with clear rationality, *Why provoke the mighty Romans to action by showering such attention on an itinerant preacher?* while the other half are wondering with inspired piety, *How can we withhold our praise when God is clearly acting in our midst?*

The tides of these differing groups are soon to collide, with a force far greater than the last verse of our Gospel reading might suggest: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." Here the story ends for the day, without any resolution or hint of where the action is headed next. Yet for those who know the rest of the story, that short sentence summarizes all that is to come. This is just a so-called prophet, from a small town in Galilee, a pretender who will soon feel the full might of empire in his tortured, broken body. And this is Jesus, the one so named because he will "save his

people,” according to Matthew’s birth narrative, the Savior whom the Lord has sent to overcome all earthly authority, even death itself.

Whatever we recognize of the purple or the palms, this holy drama is enough to compel us to say, out of profound understanding or simple annual habit, “Hosanna! Lord, save us!” For the Lord is good, whose steadfast love endures forever.