

Empty-handed (Matthew 21:1-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66)

What is a preacher to do with Palm/Passion Sunday?

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Welcome to one of the hardest Sundays in the lectionary year to preach. Palm Sunday can become a beast of burden, laden in many congregations with both the palms story and the entirety of the Passion. It's a heavy load for one Sunday, and it's a heavy load for one preacher. I often show up to this week feeling empty-handed, despite the long list of props this one service can require.

I often hear that we read both gospel passages today because people don't come to church during the Triduum anymore. But this overlay of Palm and Passion is an old tradition that's bobbed in and out of view over the centuries. Some worry that it's for convenience that we do this, but any preacher knows there's nothing convenient about it.

However we ended up with this strangely constructed Sunday, the fact of it stubbornly remains. Like excellent teachers or live theater stage managers, the task of the preacher is to manage the energy of the crowd as the drama plays out. It's on this Palm-Passion Sunday when I'm most reminded of "the crowds" the gospels talk so much about—leave it to a Sunday full of props, parades, grisly execution narratives, and sometimes livestock to leave you feeling at the mercy of the crowd's mood.

For many, Palm Sunday's energy begins in chaos: getting palms and people to the start of the parade route, someone getting lost, the inevitable lag as we try to sing together in procession. After our parade, Sunday continues seemingly "as normal" until, like Jerusalem, we are thrown into turmoil by the Passion gospel. In many churches, we even have our own beloved crowds join in on calling for Jesus' crucifixion.

For many preachers, the sermon comes right after this tumult concludes. The preacher is left to explain to everyone what on earth has just happened, like a community leader with a microphone thrust into her hand after a catastrophe. She must make some sense of this whole disorientation—from the chaos of kids in smocked dresses waving palms to the horror of thinking about Mary watching her son die, from hearing yourself yell "Hosanna!" to hearing yourself cry out "Crucify him!" The crowd watches her face to figure out how to feel.

Preaching Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion, is a terrible responsibility not unlike preaching a funeral: it is the responsibility to honor the disorientation, give voice to grief, make some sense of suffering without simplifying or reducing it. It's honest work, as it is when we're called in the middle of the night to a beloved parishioner's deathbed, mostly empty-handed, carrying only the body and blood of Christ and some oil in a

wooden box.

Whether it's moving from children's pageant to deathbed or from parade to passion, may you remember this week that you already know how to show up when you've got nothing, faced with the terrible mysteries of suffering and mortality.