

The Lone Rider along the Empty Streets
Matthew 21:1-11

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This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Today will be recorded forever as the Palm Sunday of the empty streets. None of us are joining in a traditional Palm Sunday procession. None of us are waving our palm branches. None of us are in the sanctuary to hear “the lips of children their sweet hosannas ring.” This Palm Sunday, because of the Coronavirus, just does not have the festival feeling Palm Sundays in other years have enjoyed.

Nevertheless – and please note that the gospel is always in God’s blessed “Nevertheless” – the streets that appear empty now are not altogether empty. There is a lone rider coming our way. The traditions of Palm Sunday are not happening but the truth of Palm Sunday is revealing itself. We see this truth when we focus on the lone rider who is making his way along the otherwise empty streets and to the places we are right now.

The lone rider comes from God.

This Palm Sunday feels to me rather similar to the Dr. Seuss story about the Grinch. I am sure you remember it. The Grinch thought he could stop Christmas from coming to the people called Whos. He thought it a superficial thing all wrapped up and contained in the trappings and trimmings, the wrappings and decorations, the feasts, and the lights and the trees. So he took them all from every last Who. He took every tree and every light and every package and every bow. He took it all. But Christmas came nevertheless. The day, the Grinch discovered, isn’t in anything outward; it’s in what is deep and spiritual.

So Palm Sunday has come, and with it all Holy Week. Palm Sunday has come in spite of the Grinch-like Coronavirus that is robbing us of our beloved traditions and customs. There are no palms. There are no parades. There are no special events. Still the church proclaims: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Matthew saw it that very first Palm Sunday. He described the day and said, “This happened” – not because the disciples organized it, not because they were able to recruit a donkey, and not because they were able to get people to line the streets, but – “This happened to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet.” The whole enterprise of Holy Week has God’s timetable behind it. God’s initiative is driving it.

We are not now following human rituals or practicing human ceremonies we have put into place because we like them. We are – it is this way every Palm Sunday – we are witnessing and responding to what God is doing in the world today. God is stirring. God is acting. God is

working. And so, even though there is not a palm branch in sight, the church cries out, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” Jesus, the rider along the empty streets, comes because God sends him.

The rider comes to our need.

Remember this about Jesus. Jesus himself said it about himself just two short paragraphs ahead on the one we are in now about Palm Sunday. Just two paragraphs earlier in Matthew Jesus said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mt. 20:28). There is praise along the Palm Sunday streets in Matthew, but Jesus did not come to be praised. He came because there was need. He came in answer to the need God saw and wanted to meet.

You will remember God’s word to Moses at the burning bush when the Hebrews were still in their agony under slavery in Egypt. God met Moses at the burning bush and said, not “have the people worship me and then I will think about helping them, but “I have come to deliver them.” “I have come to deliver them.”

This mindset of determination is in the heart of the Palm Sunday rider along the streets that are so empty now. “I have come,” he says, “I have come to help answer your need.”

The empty streets that prevail among us are symbolic of the need that prevails within us. There is an emptiness now that all of us feel and struggle to name. It is mostly loss: loss of routine, loss of a sense of safety, loss of confidence in the future, loss of our rituals of grief that would otherwise provide us with support. Our lives feel as empty as the streets look.

This need of ours drives the Palm Sunday rider on, deeper and deeper into the heart of our lives. As he reaches you, he asks questions like the ones he asked people on the pages of the New Testament. What do you want me to do for you? Do you want to be well? Where are those who accuse you? How long has this trouble been with you? Jesus, the Palm Sunday rider along the empty streets, comes because God has sent him in answer to our need.

The lone rider comes with teaching.

Palm Sunday, as it occurs in scripture, begins a week of teaching. Our Lord doesn’t go straight from the donkey to the cross. There is teaching that intervenes, a great deal of teaching. There is teaching in parables, teaching about the resurrection, teaching about the Great Commandment, teaching about the Holy Spirit, teaching about God the Father, and teaching about that many-roomed mansion.

The Jesus who came teaching then comes teaching now. His teaching is happening right in the middle of this Coronavirus pandemic. We are learning what the church is and what the church’s mission ought to be. We are learning what is essential in life to keep it sustained. We are learning who is essential to life to keep it running. And we are learning how to look to Jesus, be drawn to Jesus, and be loyal to Jesus. We are learning all this and more.

The lone rider hears the praise you long to shout.

Remember this about Jesus: he knew the hearts of people. He understood full well what was on their minds even before they spoke.

The Lord reads your heart and mind. God knows you would love to be in public worship saying your prayers and singing your hymns. God feels your love and is not stopped from receiving your worship. This much of worship – this solitary praying and soft singing in the safe confines of home – is complete worship in the eyes of God. The one who rides alone on the Palm Sunday streets hears your praise coming from inside your home.

This Palm Sunday is altogether different from any we have experienced before. The difference can be good for us, for it can bring us to see that Palm Sunday is not about us – our palms, our praise, our programs, our lining the streets. It is about him: it is about this Christ who comes in the name of God to bring God's help for our need and to teach us how to be God's people in God's world.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Let us find our strength and purpose in him.