

April 10, 2022 – Palm Sunday | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Luke 19:28–40](#)

TITLE: **What Makes This Week Holy?**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Name a date that lives in history. Well, there's July 4, 1776. Although in truth, not a lot happened on that day. Despite our annual Fourth of July celebrations, the Continental Congress actually voted for independence two days earlier on July 2nd. It was that date John Adams was sure would be celebrated forever. It's true that on July 4th the Continental Congress finally finished their editing work and approved a final version of the declaration; but that's about all they did that day. They didn't even sign it with their flowing signatures; that happened a month later on August 2nd.

So if July 4, 1776 isn't a day that will live in history, what are better examples? Well, there's June 8, 1610. The British settlement in Jamestown was failing. After three years of hard struggles, on June 7 a few dozen starving settlers loaded up their meager supplies and began to sail home to England. But the next morning, to their surprise they spotted a fleet of ships coming toward them, bringing a new governor and a year's worth of supplies. If not for the events of that day, Virginia might have been a lost colony and much of the United States likely would have been settled later by the French, Dutch or Spanish.

Or maybe an historic day was February 15, 1933. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was 17 days away from being inaugurated President when he decided to make an impromptu speech. A deranged anarchist named Giuseppe Zangara was in the crowd. He had bought a gun and wanted to assassinate FDR. But Zangara was too short to fire the gun over the crowd, so he stood on a wobbly metal folding chair and took aim. He lost his balance and instead of hitting Roosevelt, he mortally wounded Anton Cernak, the mayor of Chicago, who happened to be shaking FDR's hand right then. Had Roosevelt been killed, his conservative Texas running mate, John Nance Garner, would most likely have been named president. That would have meant no New Deal; no four terms of FDR's reforms and wartime leadership and international vision. How the world would have been changed had it not been for Zangara's wobbly chair.

Today we remember the Palm Sunday from long ago, and we wonder: Was it a date that changed history? At first glance, it certainly looks like it was the start of a week that changed history. Jesus already had quite a reputation as a teacher and miracle worker when a gathered crowd cheered him as he rode into the capital city of Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. From there he caused a public stir by overturning tables in the temple market. Within a few days he would share a final meal with his disciples and be arrested by temple police while praying in a quiet olive grove. Accused of blasphemy and sedition, on Friday he would be hurriedly tried and then crucified that same afternoon, dying publicly on a cross between two criminals before being buried in a borrowed tomb. On Saturday, the Sabbath, all was quiet, but on Sunday, the first day of a new week, he would emerge from the tomb to the astonishment of all. Maybe Palm Sunday

alone isn't a day that changed all history, but it is certainly part of a week that did. But is there more to this story? What makes this week so powerful—and ultimately so holy?

Let's back up a moment. The two examples I mentioned earlier—the ones about Jamestown and FDR—represent critical dates in which something almost happened that would have dramatically changed history. The early settlers almost abandoned their colony at Jamestown, which could have meant no British presence on North American soil and perhaps no America as we know it. Zangara's bullet didn't hit FDR, so Roosevelt survived to lead the U.S. through World War II and a period of incredible changes. Historians love to ask "What if?" questions. What if Japan had chosen their alternate plan and bombed the British colony of Singapore instead of Pearl Harbor in 1941? What if Rosa Parks had caught a different bus that day in Montgomery, one that wasn't so crowded? Human history is never just a record of what happened. It is also a record of what might have happened. We are always aware of how contingent life is. We carry around all the things that happened to us as well as memories of the things that almost changed our personal history: the car accident in which miraculously no one was seriously hurt; the chance meeting that led to your parents getting together and ultimately to you being born. History is always about "what is" and "what if."

Now, in contrast to that contingency, there is a sense of inevitability when we think about the events of Holy Week. Jesus woke up that Palm Sunday morning and told his disciples to get a donkey from the village ahead. He told them in advance where it was and what to say when they were questioned. Next, when Jesus and the disciples were heading toward the city gate, the crowd notably changed the words of the psalm from saying, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" to "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" That language got the Romans' attention, since any threat to Caesar was a threat that had to be silenced. And it got the Jewish leaders' attention, who told Jesus to quiet his disciples. But the sheer inevitability of all that was happening was heard in Jesus' response: "Look, if the people fall silent, the stones themselves will shout out."

We can still ask "What if?" What if the crowd around Jesus had been smaller and not attracted so much attention? What if Jesus hadn't made a public scene in the temple or if Judas hadn't agreed to tell the Pharisees where they might arrest Jesus under cover of night? Yes, there are some contingencies in the Passion story, but in the end, it still feels inevitable. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, would never be able to live long in a world so committed to war. Jesus, the light of the world, would always be a threat to those who preferred the shadows of sin. Jesus the Lamb of God would end up sacrificed simply because he wasn't living history; he was constantly making history. That final week he was revealing something about God and us and all human history. And nothing, absolutely nothing, would stop that from happening.

Think of it this way: Jamestown, Zangara, Pearl Harbor, Rosa Parks—those all affect history on a horizontal level, on a human level. They help shape the roads we travel on earth when going from here to there. But the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—the events of Holy Week—affected history on a vertical level. Suddenly the

ways of heaven were made clear amidst the contingencies of earthly life. Suddenly the will and power of God were revealed in the very deeds of human history. The way we think about our life was changed forever. A heaven-sent king entered humbly on a donkey. An innocent Savior died on a cross. A risen Lord emerged from a tomb. These things changed everything.

It is so hard to talk about this without using abstract theological language. Preachers often describe holy week as a time of “revelation”—of God’s nature being revealed to us in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. I was struggling with how to put this in simpler terms when I fortunately read an article about a recently retired Presbyterian professor named David Johnson. Dr. Johnson taught at Austin Theological Seminary for 20 years. He had a flowing white beard and was quick with a smile or a quip. He was remembered as saying things like: *There is no verse in scripture that implies gluing a fish symbol to the trunk of your car gives you permission to be a jerk.* In a wonderful statement that is both theologically profound and grammatically concise, Dr. Johnson said this about our Presbyterian faith: *The fundamental axiom of Reformed Spirituality is this: God loves you. That is fact - there is no 'maybe', 'if' or 'but.' There is a "therefore." Exploring that 'therefore' is our life's work.*

Think about that for a moment. The statement is not, “God loves you, maybe” or “God loves you if...” or “God loves you, but...” It is simply “God loves you; therefore...” Our life work is exploring that “therefore.” Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey—not a war horse or mighty steed—simply to embody the message that God knows us, sees us, and is with us. The people shouted “Hosanna” and called him a king without realizing his kingdom was far more than of this world. And when the Jewish leaders tried to silence all of this revelatory history, Jesus reminded them that God’s love and the incredible “therefore” of our life of Christian faith would be shouted out by the stones if the crowds ever grew still.

Palm Sunday is a culminating example of God’s reign breaking into our earthly reality. Jesus riding a donkey, his momentary weeping over a city blind to God’s love, his overturning of tables in the temple—it is a day of public witness to the fact that all of life is meant to be a response to God’s abiding love for us. And that great day in history didn’t stop there. It moved to another day of Jesus teaching, then another day of a shared final meal and a secretive arrest; then another day of an unjust trial, a whipping, mocking, and crucifying; before a day of darkness and a week that concluded with the wonder of Easter itself. It was a week that changed all history. It was a week of revelation and wonder—of heaven being fully revealed on earth. And for that reason it was above all else a holy week. Starting today let us remember this holy week that changed all history. Take time to walk intentionally through the next few days. And always hold onto the good news: God loves you; therefore...”

AMEN