

**March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

## **John 12:12-16 “Songs of Loudest Praise”**

Welcome to the last Sunday of Lenten season. Our six-week journey is coming to a close, and next week we'll meet here to celebrate the Risen Christ. The Sunday before Easter is known as “Palm Sunday” or “Passion Sunday.” The scripture for Palm Sunday is always one of the gospel writers' accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem before his crucifixion. This year, we get John's version, and as you can tell, it's the shortest. You may also notice that John's version doesn't mention Peter which might cause you to say, “Wait, isn't the theme for our Lenten season supposed to focus on Jesus' ministry through Peter's eyes?” Yes, it is. But Peter is not mentioned in the passage Georgia read nor is he mentioned anywhere in chapter twelve. He's not even mentioned in chapter eleven which is the setup for this story. We hear all sorts of things about Philip, Andrew, and Judas Iscariot, but not Peter. What's the point of having a study on Peter's perception of Jesus' ministry if we're not going to talk about Peter? Fair question. The gospel writer may not mention him by name, but it's fair to assume he was there and he will certainly play a major role in the last week of Jesus' life. That means we're going to have to use our imaginations this week. We've got to consider, “Where was Peter and what was he up to?”

Palm Sunday is a familiar story for folks in the church. Jesus had spent three years teaching, preaching, and healing all throughout Judea. Peter was there at his side the whole time. A week before Lent even started, we got to see a glimpse of Peter's legendary enthusiasm when he witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. He wanted to build a tabernacle on the mountain where this miracle took place and just stay there. But Jesus reminded him that they had work to do among the people. Then we saw Peter overreact to the miracle of the abundant catch of fish. For some reason Peter thought this miracle pointed to some kind of failure in his life. Jesus had to give him a little pep talk to work through those feelings. The week after that, we got to see Peter walk on water until fear caused him to sink. The following week, we saw him receive praise when he affirmed that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God. But the following week, when he tried to tell Jesus that he shouldn't go to Jerusalem knowing he would be killed, Jesus called him "Satan" and ordered him to get behind him. Finally, last week we heard Peter ask Jesus a thoughtful question about how many times he should forgive a person who sinned against him. Okay pastor, but where is he this week? To which I say, "I don't know. But where do *you* think he is?" "How should we know? The Bible doesn't say! What, do you want us to write some apostolic fan fiction or something? I'm pretty sure the Bible says something against adding to or taking

away anything from scripture!” Kind of, although that doesn’t really apply to what we’re doing here.

I’m just asking you to take what you already know about Peter and try to imagine what he *might* have been doing on Palm Sunday. What do we know? We know that no matter what Peter says and does, he always remains tethered to God. We know that he sometimes says things without thinking. We know that he cares about what Jesus thinks of him and makes an effort to please him although sometimes he gets things wrong. We know that he is a fisherman by trade and “dropped his nets” at the opportunity to follow Jesus. We know that he has Jesus’ trust. We know that even though he wasn’t a scholar or a religious leader, he has a good handle on Jewish law and customs. Because of this, he’s familiar with the concept of the Messiah being the one who will deliver Israel from its enemies. We know that his opinion of the current religious authorities is that they are power-hungry and not at all interested in the affairs of common people. In fact, they go out of their way to tell the common people they aren’t good enough because they don’t follow the finer points of Jewish law. They are more interested in being high on the social ladder and close to the elite ruling class of the Roman hierarchy. Peter has a clear picture in his mind about what the Messiah is supposed to do to free his people from oppression. He doesn’t understand how Jesus thinks this should happen. Peter believes that the prophets

predicted that the Messiah would roll in with swords, chariots and an army of heavenly warriors to defeat Israel's enemies with superior military might. So what do you think Peter thought of Jesus riding in through the back gate of Jerusalem on a donkey? And he did this on a day where the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate was coming in through the front gate with a parade of soldiers and chariots. I think Peter may have been upset or disappointed. This little "peaceful protest parade" was the polar opposite of his expectations. And you know what they say – unmet expectations lead to resentments.

It's possible that Peter *felt* like speaking his mind as he often did, but hesitated because the last time he expressed his disapproval of Jesus' plans, he got called "Satan" and was told to get with the program. Maybe Peter was hiding out on the sidelines brooding. "Oh, this is a fine little parade we've got going here. Pfft. This donkey is probably going to slip on one of these palm branches that people are laying out on the path. Jesus should be up at the front gate waiting for Pilate. And then when Pilate shows up at the gate, Jesus can say, 'Not today old man! Not on my watch.' Or maybe he could say, 'Go ahead. Make my day.'" The thing is, Jesus made it very clear how things were going to go down. The gospel writer of Matthew wrote, "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be

killed, and on the third day be raised.” That’s why Peter lodged his protest in the first place. Now he’s probably thinking, “That’s not the way things are supposed to be. Jesus has it all wrong! And if this is the way things are going to go down, I don’t want to have anything to do with it. ‘Get behind me Satan’ I’ll get behind you. I’ll get behind you and sit under that tree over there and eat figs. And when your donkey slips and falls, your new favorite disciple Philip can go pick you up.” Now, I don’t know that this is what happened. Again, I’m just using my imagination here. It would be fun to hear some of the stories you come up with about where Peter might have been during this event. Using our creativity gets us thinking and it helps us reflect on our own relationship with Christ.

All four of the gospels record Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As I said earlier, John’s version is the shortest. John leaves out Jesus’ instructions for his disciples to get a colt and bring it to him. Instead, Jesus finds his own donkey to fulfill the scriptures. Then the writer says, “His disciples did not understand these things at first” in the first part of John 12:16. See, I imagine myself in this crowd feeling the same way. I can picture the disciples in the crowd waving their palm branches, looking at each other and wondering, “Is there something these people see that we don’t? What are we missing here?” Misunderstanding is a common theme in John, and rightly

so. We're not supposed to comprehend that God came to dwell with us in the flesh of a human body. And at this point in the story, it's not possible to grasp what Jesus' reign is all about. The only thing they know is that Jesus will be arrested, tried, crucified, and resurrected. The fullness of grace will only be realized once Jesus returns to God to prepare a dwelling place for us as he said he'd do in John 14:2. No wonder the disciples couldn't understand as they watched Jesus ride into town on this donkey. I'm not sure any of us would understand. But then John writes in the second part of verse 16, "Then they remembered." Isn't that how things often work in life and faith? As the saying goes, "hindsight is twenty-twenty." But John isn't specific about what the disciples actually remembered.

There's a kind of suspension of normal time on Palm Sunday because we're looking forward to the events of Holy Week, but we also know how the story ends. So we already see this story through a "resurrection lens." "Then they remembered" is an *invitation* to us on Palm Sunday. Like Peter and the disciples in the crowd waving their branches, we are also witnesses to the meaning of Jesus' ministry and eventual reign. What will we remember about this day and about the week to come? Will our "hosannas" still ring out by Good Friday, or will the hard truths of the events we'll witness silence our praise?

Here's the question I want you to ponder as we enter into Holy Week: In your faith journey, when have you gone through a confusing and uncertain season? Have you ever found clarity by looking back on that time with a new perspective? What allowed you to understand in hindsight? What did you realize? What did you remember? May this Holy Week be a time of contemplation and growth as we are invited to prepare for our Easter celebration.