



Sunday April 2, 2023
Matthew 21:1-11 (Palm Sunday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Many of us have a difficult time living without answers, don't we. Regardless of the circumstances, even the simplest of answers would be better than no answer at all. Our youngest son is a curious little 8 yr. old – as most 8 yr. old's are. And there's not much that passes by him without him asking the question – “*why?*” – *Why this? Why that?* Sometimes his why questions are adorable and innocent, other times they're funny – and sometimes they're even confrontational. And every once and awhile they're a little intrusive, causing me to consider my own “*why?*” question – “*why would you ask me that?*”

But we all have them. And depending on what's happening in your life – “*why?*”, may be the biggest question on your mind lately. I bet I could even guess a few of the why questions you've been asking.

Why is the time of day when traffic moves the slowest called “rush hour”? Why is abbreviated such a long word? Why is lemon juice made with artificial flavor and dishwashing liquid made with real lemons? Why is a pizza box square when a pizza is round? Why is vanilla ice cream white but vanilla extract brown? Why does your nose run and your feet smell? Why does “slim chance” and “fat chance” have the same meaning? Why are some prayers answered and others aren't?

My friends, we're getting really close to the end now. For the past five weeks we've journeyed through this season of Lent alongside Jesus as he gradually gets closer and closer to the cross. And today, on Palm Sunday we remember and celebrate his triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem. I know that for many people, Palm Sunday tends to be a day of celebration filled with palm branches waving as the Gospel procession takes place to the joyful shouts of Hosanna.

But I have to be honest with you – each year when Palm Sunday comes around, I don't exactly feel the joy and celebration of the people who Matthew tells us spread their cloaks on the road and waved palms in welcome and celebration. What I do feel, though, is a deep sense of confusion, guilt, and shame – and from the depths of my soul, a heartbreaking cry arises...*Why?*

I think it's fair to assume that you're familiar with this question; it's the distressed cry we express when we're confused by our circumstances, outraged by acts of violence or injustice, or simply feel completely out of control. *Why did the cancer come back? Why was I chosen to be let go? Why is my child struggling so much? Why do I feel so alone? Why don't they love me anymore? Why can't I shake this addiction? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why did my loved one have to die?*

Why? is the question that helps us articulate our deep desire to find meaning in meaningless events. *Why?* helps us gain understanding and not feel quite so overwhelmed by circumstances beyond our control. And it's *this* very question that disturbs me each year when Palm Sunday rolls around: *Why does Jesus come when he knows the opposition that awaits him? Why do the same people whose joyous shouts of Hosanna, shift to a call for the Savior's crucifixion only a few days later? Why must Jesus die like this? Why the mockery and abuse? Why the nails and the cross? Why such an agonizing and shameful death? Why must it end this way?*

When I come face to face with these why's, my human sinfulness and guilt rises to the surface, and I recognize the why's confronting my own hypocrisy: *Why do I keep turning away from God? Why is my faithfulness so weak? Why are my earthly desires so important to me? Why isn't God enough?*

Now, I'm going to ask you to be patient and encourage you not to jump ahead just yet . . . for the moment at least, don't rush to get to Easter and the end of the story because it makes you feel good – or more likely, because it makes you feel uncomfortable to dwell in this part of the story for too long. You're probably asking yourself, *why?* when we know the outcome of the story – why shouldn't we rush to get there?

Because maybe, dwelling and pondering in the midst of the tension of the Palm Sunday story is actually good for us. Perhaps by staying here a little bit longer we might come to appreciate the true significance of the path that Jesus takes on our behalf in order to redeem and save us.



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And I wonder where you might see *yourselves* in this story. Because *we're* fortunate enough to have the last 2000 plus years of hindsight, and it's easy to judge the characters in the story from a distance. But are we're really so different from them? *How quickly does our faith fade when God doesn't deliver what we're expecting or when we expect it? How easily do we hesitate to follow Jesus when we realize the risks that come with being his disciple? How often do our self-serving desires lead us to deny Jesus and his claim on our lives?*

Today we begin our journey into Holy Week, and soon we'll set our feet on the road to the Last Supper, to the garden to pray, to the cross, and eventually to the tomb where the lifeless body of Jesus will lay. We may already know the ending, but I want you to continue pretending that you don't. The disciples didn't, and when Jesus died on that Friday for all they knew, that was the end. Because if death has the last word, then Easter isn't a miracle, and it holds absolutely *no* significance. But we haven't reached the end yet, so let this story do what it intends to do. And let this story be what it has to be.

The Palm Sunday story – in fact, the entire Holy Week story is a story of life. It's the story of *our* lives. Joy. Love. Fear. Disappointment. Anger. Grief. Betrayal. Pain. Even into the ordinary – eating, drinking, washing – God breathes life. In the midst of the story is where we encounter joy and grief, celebration and pain. Immersed in the journey through Holy Week is where we see our ordinary lives echoed in the life and love of Jesus. Here, we see our imperfect lives reflected in the perfect and saving love of Christ. *This is our story.*

With all this in mind then, what are we supposed to do with this day? Well, for me at least, the answer is as simple and as complex as it was on the day it occurred. I think the hardest part of this story is accepting that we may never be able to fully understand the persistent and puzzling question of *why*. But maybe we can have more success answering another question – for whom.

The key to all of this, I think, is that you and I hear that *this story is for us*. Jesus suffers so that when we are suffering, we know that God understands and cares for us. Jesus is completely alone by the end of the story so that when we feel alone, we know that God understands and is with us. Jesus cries out in despair so that when we become convinced that the whole world is against us and feel ready to give up, we know that God understands and holds on to us. Jesus dies so that we know God understands death and the fear of death and reminds us that death does not have the final word.

This is the story that we hear today – the story of God's relentless quest to redeem each and all of us in love. Each week we're invited into a story that's not about all that went wrong in the past week, but about what might go right in the week to come. It's a story that isn't about what we lack, but all that we've been given. And it's not a story that exposes our problems or shortcomings, but instead lifts up our gifts and blessings. It's God's story that tells us again and again that we are loved, that we are precious, and that we have infinite value and worth in God's eyes.

To tell you the truth – I don't exactly know what to do with all of this – but I trust that God does. I don't completely get it, but I don't really know that I have to either – because I believe that God does. And I'm not exactly sure that I want to figure it all out either – and that's okay – because God already has.

I think this is the very mystery of Jesus' journey to the cross. That although we may never fully understand the “why” of God's incomprehensible commitment to us – when we come face to face with Jesus on the cross, we can never doubt God's overwhelming love for us.

So, while dwelling in Jesus' journey to the cross may be difficult for us, when we do, we're reminded that in Jesus, we've been given God's tangible and unrelenting promise that God is always and forever for us. And this, my friends makes dwelling in this moment completely worth it. So let our shouts of Hosanna ring. Welcome to Holy Week. Thanks be to God. Amen!