

[Opinion](#)
[Spirituality](#)
[Scripture for Life](#)



People wave palm fronds to be blessed before Palm Sunday Mass at a church in Paranaque City, the Philippines, April 14, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)



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Today may be the most overwhelming day of the overwhelming holy week to come. Palm Sunday takes us step by step through Jesus' last days and then leaves us holding emptiness, seeing only death. The church calls this day Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, an inelegant mouthful that tells us exactly what's coming: high acclaim followed by treachery and tragedy. When we take it seriously, this week is too much to handle in just eight days. We need to choose a focus, knowing that every one of its moments and movements is sacramental and full of grace.

Let's start at the beginning. Jesus sends disciples into a village outside the Holy City to get the prearranged props for his entry into Jerusalem. Matthew reminds us that this fulfills ancient prophecies. The symbolism of it all ignited the people, and they turned it into participative theater. They started a carousing liturgical procession in which the participants unwittingly proclaimed their faith in just exactly who Jesus was: the savior who appeared grandly humble amidst the holy commoners. They praised him with abandon.

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

[April 5, 2020](#)

Matthew 21:1-11

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalm 22

Philippians 2:6-11

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Simplicity marked every detail — all the way to being a mockery of the pretentious parades of the powerful. Unlike victorious Roman generals who drove four-horse chariots through the city accompanied by slaves and prisoners of war, Jesus led the way for whoever freely joined the throng. Instead of a warhorse bred through

generations for strength and show, Jesus' mount was a mother donkey who wouldn't be separated from her foal. Instead of flaunting imperial banners, the people waved tree branches, a burlesque of the feathered fans slaves had to keep in constant motion lest their masters break a sweat.

Yet, for all the simplicity of its props, the paraders reveled in excess. In their excitement, mimicking Caiaphas who would soon rend his garments in anger at Jesus, people threw their cloaks down so that not even the donkey would sully her feet as she carried Jesus forth.

On top of it all there were shouts and singing, a spontaneous chorus crying out phrases from the Psalms, moving into unison as they acclaimed the Son of David.

"Hosanna!"

"Hosanna!" is a cry of praise precisely because it means "Save us now!" Shouting "Hosanna!" says, "Jesus is the way and the truth!" It is a cheer for this man whose power is love, healing and forgiveness. "Hosanna" proclaims, "You are the one who saves!"

Caught up in the moment, this crowd gets it right. If God ever wants human praise, it is this sort. Simple people and anyone else unafraid to identify with them, caught up together in an extravagant liturgy of hope and devotion. These were ordinary folk, joyfully asking God to be God for them.

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The first Gospel we hear today invites us into holy excess. It urges us to let ourselves go in words and gestures that acclaim God for being God.

Remembering Jesus' procession into the Holy City also draws us to meditate on the mystery of the God whose incarnation in Jesus took on all the frailty and simplicity of our humanity. Singing "Hosanna!" we remember what Paul quoted to the Philippians: The Christ, our real savior, is one who "did not grasp at equality with God." We cry "Hosanna!" to the one who countered the jealous sin of Adam and Eve, who sought nothing other than obedience to the God who gave him life.

"Hosanna!" is a prayer of petition. It cries "Save us!" We join in today's procession to remember to whom we make that plea. When we wave our palms, we are acclaiming the savior who arrives on a borrowed donkey. When we sing "Hosanna!" we join in mocking the powers of this world: the glitter, the luxury, the power to oppress. We sing "Hosanna!" and ask to be with him and to be like him.

Picking up a palm branch makes us an official and public part of that procession. As we hold or wave or save that piece of palm, we should remember that in a year, we will burn it and use the ashes to mark ourselves as people who did not live up to our side of the bargain when we cried "Save us!"

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion ushers us into Holy Week. We process today, knowing what is coming at the end of the week. Unlike that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem in the midst of an excited, but naïve crowd, we celebrate in memory of it all. As we process into the overwhelming liturgies of Holy Week, the challenge is to mean it when we sing "Hosanna!" We are asking to be one with him who emptied himself for us.

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