

Rev'd John Shoaf — Sermon — 2 April 2023 — Palm Sunday
Isaiah 50:4-9
Phil 2:5-11
Luke 19:28-40

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord.
Amen.

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Today is a day of refreshment. The long 40 days of Lent can be a bit depressing, as we think about the fate which Jesus faces: the torture of crucifixion and death nailed to a cross, with mockers all around him, abandoned by his own people. But today is truly a good day for Jesus, as he rides into Jerusalem to find crowds of people welcoming him with joy and love. We should allow ourselves to enjoy this scene of triumph and joy, before we turn again to the heart-breaking final walk up the hill to death. Blessed indeed is one who comes in the name of the Lord.

And Jesus is coming — not just in the name of the Lord, but the Lord himself, although there are many people in the crowd who maybe don't believe this. But this day is Jesus' day, and the loud cries of "Hosanna!" must have been like music to his ears. So many of his people have rejected him, that to hear these happy cries of "Hosanna" would have been wonderful for him.

He comes riding on a donkey, which may surprise some people, who might have expected him to come in like a victorious general, wearing a fancy uniform and riding up high on a big white horse. But Jesus is not a warrior or a soldier. He does not take delight in conflict and bloody battles. He does not seek to hurt any of his people, for all the people are his people.

Jesus comes in peace. And as a matter of fact, in Jesus' day, when someone important, like a king or a general or any kind of leader, went to visit another place, they would ride a donkey — if they were coming in peace. A soldier at war would ride a horse, but a person coming in peace would ride a donkey. It was pretty common to ride donkeys then. And since a donkey is smaller, and doesn't run as fast as a horse, they didn't seem so threatening. So if you saw someone riding into town on a donkey, you knew they came in peace.

And that is what Jesus did. He came in peace, and he came to bring peace to everyone. Jesus knew what he was doing when he chose to ride a donkey. He could have had a horse, but he chose a donkey because it was an animal of peace.

But even though Jesus wasn't a soldier, he was very brave. It was dangerous for him to ride into Jerusalem, because the people in charge of the temple, the chief priests, were planning to arrest him. They were looking for any opportunity to get to him and take him into custody. They were very angry with Jesus, for they were afraid of him. And on this day, this great day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, they were there too, probably standing back a bit from the crowds, certainly not crying "Hosanna!", but

just watching Jesus to see what would happen. They had planned to arrest him if he ever came back to Jerusalem. Jesus knew this, and came into the city anyway.

Still, he could have snuck in, with his disciples. He could have come in at night, perhaps, down the little side streets of the town, avoiding the big main roads, sneaking down the alleys behind the shops and houses, and meeting his disciples in secret for the Passover meal. He could have done that, if he had been too scared to come in by the main road.

But there is safety in crowds. With all those people there, all watching Jesus and cheering him on, the temple authorities and the chief priests couldn't do anything. They knew if they did, it would cause a riot, and they didn't want that. They wanted to get rid of Jesus, but they wanted to do it quietly. So they just watched, and waited for another time when they could find Jesus alone with no one to defend him.

Besides that, even if the chief priests weren't waiting to grab him, Jesus wanted to show his people what he was all about. Again — he came in peace, and peace and love were his message. Our God is a god of peace and love. Jesus knew that the people would expect a warrior or a soldier. What better way to show who he really was, than riding in on a donkey?

Besides, he wanted to be with his people. And that is a lesson for us as well. God loves us — Jesus loves us — and not just for ourselves and our comfort, but because God takes delight in his people. You know that while we live, Jesus lives in us, and when we die, we go to be with Jesus and God forever. God longs for us to open our hearts to him, so that he can be with us. God made us for his own pleasure.

All of this — Jesus's birth, his teaching, his gathering of the disciples, his healings, his arrest, trial, torture and death — are all for us. Think of that. Consider it, in very simple words. Jesus died for me. Give a prayer of thanks. "Thank you, Jesus, for dying for me." It is the simplest prayer you can make, yet it says it all.

When the crowds are all gone, and the echoes of their cries of "Hosanna!" have faded away in the distance, we will still be with Jesus, and Jesus will still be with us, for he died for us. And — he will rise again, for us. Amen.