

“Called to worship”

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



Throughout the season of Lent we've had this picture in front of us: A potter is shaping some clay. And so, in the back of our minds, we've been wondering, “How might God be shaping us?”

Lent is a time for us to be re-formed and re-shaped. Made more fully into God's image. Do our lives look like the image of God we see in Jesus? As we worship here this morning, are God's hands holding us, pressing upon us; maybe even pushing against us, forming us, shaping us, smoothing us?

Every Sunday we come at the appointed hour. We are called to worship. We pray. We sing. Read scripture. We listen to a sermon. Is God in these things? As we leave this place to go to our homes, is God still shaping and re-shaping our lives? Even in those non-churchly settings?

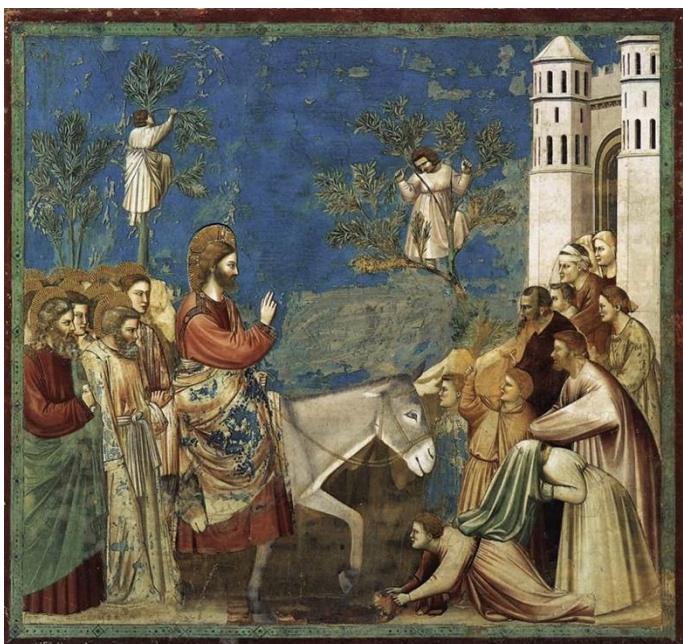


Today is Palm Sunday, the final Sunday in the season of Lent. Today we hear about a gathering of God's people outside the precincts of the sanctuary.

It was festival time. And the city of Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims, making their way to the Jewish temple. Every year the city swelled to four times its size as these pilgrims arrived.



What did they hope to experience there? The excitement of the crowd, the awesome wonder of the temple? The size of the place, the smell and sounds of the place? An experience of God's holy presence?



The Entry into Jerusalem, 1304-1306, Giotto diBondone, 1266?-1337

As Jesus and his disciples made their way into the city, a crowd formed around them. A singing, shouting, chanting crowd, full of praise.

This scene is packed with religious symbols. Jesus rides on a donkey, recalling an ancient text from the prophet Zechariah. The king enters not on a war-horse, but on a humble beast, signalling peaceful intentions. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

The crowd, which we are told has grown very large, spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from trees. The cloaks recall a time in Israel's history when a rebel king became a ruler. (2 Kings 9:13).

The tree branches, or palms, recall the people's deliverance from Egypt. God sustained them in their journey through the wilderness, when they lived in tents and temporary shelters made of branches.

The crowd shouts “Hosanna” which literally means “save us,” but can also be understood as an expression of praise. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” This is a quote from one of the Hallel Psalms used at Passover. (Psalm 118:20)

So the crowd draws on all kinds of things that express religious faith. And they focus their praise on Jesus. Is this worship? Is Jesus rightly the focus of our praise?



“Who is this man?” the crowd keeps asking. “A king,” they think. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” But what kind of king will Jesus be? “He’s a prophet,” say the crowds, “from Nazareth in Galilee.” A spokesperson from God.

Jesus is both prophet and king. They’re right in that. But is that all there is to say about him? Or is there something more?

Is this really worship? Or merely a fan club? The kind of thing we might organize for a hockey player, or a movie star, or some political celebrity.



Can we see the presence of Almighty God on this day, acting in and through the person of Jesus?

And I don’t mean only on this day, this Palm Sunday. I mean also in the week ahead, as Jesus continues his journey toward the cross. Soon he will stand before the authorities. Who is this man? “Tell us if you are the Messiah, the son of God,” the high priest, Caiaphas, says. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate, the Roman Governor, wants to know. Who are you, Jesus?



When we come to worship, we may not have all the answers. But we come seeking to know more of God, and more of God’s ways in the world.

Evelyn Underhill was an English Anglo-Catholic writer and pacifist known for her numerous works on religion and spiritual practice. “If God were small enough to be understood,” she said, “He would not be big enough to be worshiped.”¹

Now that’s a profound statement! The God we love is large, beyond our human comprehension. And if we’re worshipping a God that is smaller than that, it’s probably because we’ve reduced God down to size. We’ve made God smaller than God really is. There is always a temptation to manufacture the God we desire.



That may be happening in our passage for Palm Sunday. The crowd who’s cheering for Jesus have certain preconceptions about him. Expectations that they want him to fulfil. They’re hoping he’ll march right in and free the city from Rome’s oppressive grip. It’s not the first time they’ve pinned such hopes on a political and militaristic Messiah.

¹ <https://www.renewingworshipnc.org/worship-quotes/>, Accessed March 30, 2023.

True worship, it seems to me, stands before God with a humble heart and a willingness to learn. An eagerness to grow in faith, and discover more, ever more, of who this awesome Creator of the universe is.

The Palm Sunday crowd has much to learn about Jesus and his Kingdom way. And so do we! That's one of the reasons we're here. We want to learn, want to grow in our understanding. And in our love for God. And the awareness of God's infinite love for us.



To worship is to be in the very presence of this God. You know why those Palm Sunday crowds gathered so enthusiastically? I think they sensed that God was at work on this day. Something big was going to happen.

They couldn't say what, exactly. But there was something about Jesus. Something so true and authentic and real about this donkey-riding king that they could hardly stop themselves. The air was electric.

Do you sense it too? The events of this Holy Week are the most significant in our human history! Jesus will go to the cross. He will suffer and die. And God will raise him from death to everlasting life.

This week we will learn about the darkness of our sinful world and our complicity in it. About the love of God that will not let us go. About the meaning of forgiveness, and the costliness of our salvation. About the power of God to bring new life even in the most hopeless of circumstances.

As Jesus makes his way into the city, we know that God is powerfully at work. In the early church, and even still today in the Eastern tradition, it is called the Great Week because great deeds were done by God.



To worship is to be in the very presence of God!

A study by George Barna found that among adults who regularly attend church services, one-half admit that they haven't experienced God's presence at any time during the past year.² That's kind of sad, don't you think? We can have no inkling of the presence of God!

Is God here among us in our service of worship? Can we sense it, trust it, believe it? We're not just going through empty motions here today. We sing, we pray, we speak, we listen – trusting that the God of the universe is among us! That this is a holy place and we are not alone.

When we gather for worship, we come into a presence, which is God's presence. We may not always feel it to be so. Yet even before we set foot in this sanctuary, God is here waiting for us.



² <https://www.renewingworshipnc.org/worship-quotes/>, Accessed March 30, 2023.

God invites us to worship, to enter into a relationship of adoration and praise. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”



2019 Palm Sunday procession in Jerusalem, photo by Bahnfreund,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palm_procession_2019_in_Jerusalem_\(32\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palm_procession_2019_in_Jerusalem_(32).jpg)

Can a Jerusalem street be connected with the highest heaven? Worship is all about making that connection between earth and heaven.

When we come together like that crowd in the presence of Christ, we find ourselves connected to things that are far bigger than ourselves. To a holy God, to the company of angels and saints on high, to a people, a community of faith that stretches through the ages and wraps itself around the globe.



Worship like that is transforming! Our lives will not be the same. They will be changed. Jack Hayford writes, “Worship changes the worshiper into the image of the One worshiped.”³

So now we find ourselves back at the beginning, with the question of how God is shaping our lives: this lump of clay that we are. How might God’s hands be nudging us toward God’s image, so that we might have fullness of life?

Worship should make us alive. I fear too often it puts us to sleep! Worship should make us more like the one we worship. The worship of Jesus should make us more Christ-like.

How could it be anything other than that when we focus on him? When we gather in his presence? When we experience his love, and rejoice in his mercy given freely to all. That should make us more loving, more merciful, more gracious!

When we gather on this Palm Sunday, Jesus is the centre of our attention. Every eye is meant to be focussed on him.

We wave our branches. We sing songs of praise. We offer our prayers. And those actions help to reorient our lives. They turn us to Jesus.

Every week we come to worship. Every week we’re meant to become more like him. And more like the God in whose image we are made.

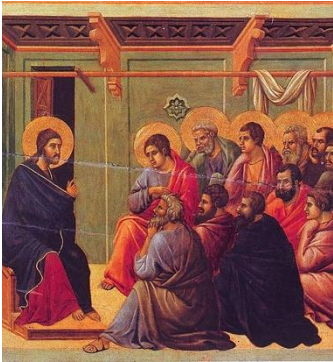


Does this happen? Is our worship transformative, life-changing? Do these repeated actions, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, do they make us any different?

In our scripture passage today, we see how enthusiastic the crowds were when they welcomed Jesus. Did it change them?

³ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1576499/Jack-W-Hayford-Worship-changes-the-worshiper-into-the-image-of-One-worshiped>, Accessed April 1, 2023.

At the end of the day, did they go home and shrug their shoulders and say, “Oh well, nothing really happened.” Was Palm Sunday a big disappointment, a misunderstanding? A boisterous flash in the pan?



“Christ taking leave of the apostles” by Duccio di Buoninsegna (1255–1319)

I guess it’s important to recognize that we can all respond to the same experience in different ways. We may go to the same restaurant, eat the same food. And some will say it’s the greatest meal they’ve ever had. And others will remark, “nothing special,” and never return.

Did some of the folks who gathered on that first Palm Sunday become followers of Jesus? Were they moved by what they saw? Did the events of that day make a deep and lasting impression upon them? Were the hands of God shaping their clay? Did they find themselves caught up in a larger story? I wonder.

And did other folks turn their back and walk away? Were some of this crowd also present on Good Friday when there were no shouts of acclamation, but calls instead for his crucifixion? It’s

hard to imagine such a turn-around, isn’t it? One moment we welcome, the next we reject.

True worship changes us. It brings us closer to the God who loves. The Christ who humbly gave his life for our salvation. The Spirit who empowers us to love and serve as we follow the way of Jesus.

Follow or walk away? Which is it for you?



“Ecce Homo” by Hieronymus Bosch (circa 1450 –1516)



“Christ Crucified” by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660)

Next Sunday will be another boisterous Sunday. It will be the very best Sunday of the year!

But before we get there, there will be some hard things ahead. Things that will make us want to turn away. The one we welcome today will be betrayed, rejected. His disciples scattered. His body hung on a cross, then locked in a grave.

May our worship this day give us strength to keep going through every dark valley of our lives. May it bring us to a glorious day of rejoicing that will never end. May God be with us! Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What prompts you to worship?
- What is the purpose of worship?
- How might worship change you?
- What is your prayer?