

The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett
St. James' Church, Mt. Airy

We begin Holy week in a dramatic, complicated way. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, if our liturgy seems a bit disjointed, with the excitement of the Palm Procession leading abruptly into the drama and despair of the Passion gospel, there's a reason for that. The two don't really belong together. What we have is the mash-up of two ancient traditions.

When the first followers of Jesus were trying to figure out the most appropriate way to remember their Lord, they decided to retell some of the story they had been told about Jesus every Sunday when they gathered for supper in his name.

Naturally, they decided to read the resurrection story every year as close to the anniversary as possible, so the Sunday before that, they would read the story of his death on the cross. And that was the practice of early Christians almost everywhere.

Except in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Christians decided to read the stories of the last week of Jesus' life on the days they happened in the places they happened. On Maundy Thursday they would retell the story of the Last Supper in the small church built on the presumed site where Jesus and the Disciples met. On Good Friday they would read the story of the Passion at the place where Jesus was crucified. And, early on the Sunday morning before Easter, they would reenact

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem along the road where it took place, with Palms and a donkey and everything. Then, that evening they would gather for supper and Eucharist as usual.

You can imagine that the Holy Week observances in Jerusalem were quite popular. They still are. What could be more inspiring and moving than to spend the week reliving the great story in the places where it happened?

Well, as it turns out, Holy Week in Jerusalem became a huge tourist draw. By the fourth century, Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem were widespread, and when the pilgrims returned home, they brought with them a desire to celebrate Holy Week in their own communities with as much drama and inspiration as they had experienced in Jerusalem.

And so, instead of abandoning the old calendar that had them reading the Passion Gospel on the Sunday before Easter at their regular worship, they just added the Jerusalem cycle of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil to their regular Sunday worship.

And we've been doing it ever since – the Jerusalem cycle of day-by-day remembrance, which puts the Passion on Good Friday; and the Sunday cycle that puts the Passion on the Sunday before Easter – making our Palm *and* Passion Sunday a bit confusing. But whenever the traditions of different communities come

together, whether it's music or worship or leadership, there's always some confusion, isn't there?

But if the abrupt switch from shouts of "Hosanna!" to shouts of "Crucify him!" on the same morning is jarring to us, it must have been bewildering, even separated by a week, to our ancestors who actually did the shouting. How can a palm-waving mob of fans, waving leafy branches and throwing their own clothes down on the mud to keep a donkey from getting its feet muddy, become, in just a week, a mob of enemies, screaming for the death of the one they so recently adored?

The Passion Gospel attributes this to the trickery of the community leaders who were afraid of Jesus' growing power. But I think the real answer can be found in what they were shouting. "Hosanna" seems to us like an exclamation of praise, a joyful word, but it's actually a demand. The palm-waving crowd is not shouting "hail" to their new king, but "Save us now!" to their new general.

For that is what Hosanna means: "Save us now." It's the thing you shout to a liberating army as they march on the stronghold of a tyrant.

But of course there is no army behind Jesus. He's just one guy on a donkey. And he's not riding into Jerusalem to overthrow the Roman oppressors, but to die as a criminal on the cross. And it is the clash between expectations and reality that brings the crowd so quickly from hope to despair; from "save us!" to "save yourself!"

We are not so different from that mob we have given voice to today. We are quick to pin our hopes – for change, for redemption, for renewal – on others: leaders, parents, spouses, children. We hope that the new president or priest or partner or parenthood will change everything, and when they don't, we become discouraged, disillusioned, or angry. We hope, and then we hurt.

Holy week is a perfect chance to examine and change that pattern. Here at the beginning, we see the contradiction, feel the futility, as we shout “Hosanna!” and then “Crucify!” But as the week goes on, and we move through the unfolding Passion of Jesus more slowly, we have a chance to consider whether God is calling us to follow a different road, a road that doesn't involve hope and disappointment in others for not being the leaders or saviors we want, but a road that takes us, with Jesus, beyond hope and despair to resurrection.

For it is resurrection – new life – that God has in store for us; not conquest nor defeat. And though the road to resurrection surely takes us to the cross, it does not end there. Although we pause there today, Jesus' journey – and God's path for us – never ends at the cross.

Amen.