

Introductory

There are several text options for Palm Sunday or the Sunday of the Passion, given in the LSB three-year lectionary. I will be dealing with the shorter John text, which is now the same as three years ago, which was different from the shortened John text from three years before that, which was verses twenty through forty-three. Who makes this stuff up?

If ever there were a case of “didn’t we just see this text,” it would be this. In LSB, Matthew’s account of the Triumphal Entry is the text appointed for Advent 1A, Mark’s account for Advent 1B, and Luke’s account for Advent 1C. Various readings from John’s account are appointed for Palm Sunday A, B, and C.

The Matthean account had been the reading appointed for Palmarum, Palm Sunday, in TLH, before The Church moved to the three-year series. LW had moved the synoptic accounts of the Triumphal Entrance to Advent 1, A, B, and C, and appointed various pericopes taking place during Holy Week to be read on Palm Sunday.

The LSB return to Palm Sunday pericopes for Palm Sunday is a good thing, and they preach well also on Advent 1. If your people do not know about the Triumphal entry, it’s not the fault of the lectionary. Oh, and this might be a good time for another review of the chronology of Holy Week.

They know about Palm Sunday, but they don’t know everything about it. Maybe add some new information for the people who know it well. With seven years in at my present charge, I have a pretty good idea of what they know and what they don’t know. I know because I know what they say to me, and I know because I know what I have said to them.

I also know that, as is the case with any group, some will know more than others. Not everybody is there every time, and not everybody listens to and retains things equally. So we will say some things that people know about, but we will try to say some things that will be new to the every Sunday crowd, and you can actually say that about every week.

As a base, we can begin by preaching a children’s sermon. I preach my children’s sermon from the pulpit, right after the Sermon Hymn, and the bulletin lists it as “Sermon Theme” and then gives the title of the sermon. From that base, I add things that are on a more adult level, and finally things that are going to be new and profound to many of the hearers.

Two weeks ago, we saw Jesus heal the man born blind, and John spent almost an entire chapter on that miracle and its aftermath. The next chapter (10) is about Him and His identity as the Good Shepherd and the Son of God. Last week, we saw John spend another nearly entire chapter on the raising of Lazarus from the dead and its aftermath.

The current chapter (12) begins with a date stamp; it is “six days before the Passover,” and Jesus is in Bethany. John places Him at the home of His friends, noting that the “Lazarus” at that home is the same man He had recently raised from the dead. Judas was also there, and he criticized Mary for using costly ointment to wash the feet of Jesus, using her hair.

Jesus came to her defense, descriptively noting that poverty is the way of things in this fallen world, and by the way, my funeral is just around the corner. When people heard that He was there, they came to the house to see Him, and to see Lazarus, who had rightly become something of a rock star. How many people do you know like Lazarus?

For Lazarus, rock star status is a double-edged sword. People marveled at the dead man who is now alive, and for some of them it went farther than that; many Hebrews were going after Jesus and believing in Him on account of Lazarus. The religious leaders got together and decided that the best way to deal with that problem was – Lazarus had to go as well.

Textual Notes

12. Those who came to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus are described with a definite article as “ὁ ὄχλος πολὺς – the great crowd.” Not all translations get it right, and there are variants which omit the article, but the evidence is for it being there. Shifting scenes now, we have the same “ὁ ὄχλος πολὺς – the great crowd” on the move to Jerusalem.

John has told us (11:18) that Jerusalem is two miles (fifteen stadia) from Bethany, which for many Americans would by foot be a grueling odyssey, but it was for them a relatively short walk. It is clear from the clear words of John that the crowd who came to Bethany are the same crowd who are now making their way over to Jerusalem, and for a purpose.

They were in the vicinity because of the Passover. So, the logistics have them – probably from a lot of different locations – in vicinity for Passover. They heard that Jesus was over in Bethany, and as an added bonus Lazarus was there too – oh, it’s the dead guy’s house! They went over to Bethany, and now they are going to the thing for which they came.

It’s time for Passover; “ὄχλος πολὺς ὁ ἐλθὼν εἰς τὴν ἑορτήν – the great crowd was coming to the feast.” When word came that Jesus was in Jerusalem, their focus changed; “ἀκούσαντες ὅτι ἔρχεται Ἰησοῦς εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα – having heard that Jesus was coming into Jerusalem,” that was a pretty big deal, and their attention swung over to Him.

Yes, Independence Day fireworks are a big deal in Grand Mound, Iowa, and people come from far and wide to behold them. A big deal would become even bigger if a famous person were to come to the Grand Mound fireworks. If that were to happen, then the large crowds would be even larger. So, the presence of Jesus at Jerusalem at that time.

It's been awhile since I've talked about not talking about the OT very much. Somebody posted on FB last week that he's never heard a Lutheran pastor mention – I forget the rite, or occasion, or something – some Jewish thing. I said that I'm too busy talking about how Jesus made that dead guy come back to life to talk about that Jewish – it was something.

I will probably spend a little bit of time talking about the OT Passover Feast, but not much, and only to help them understand the festival. I may mention Independence Day – it's more than *just* fireworks – in Grand Mound, Iowa. I find that as time goes by, I talk less and less about the OT text or concepts as time goes by, and I'm still not a Marcionite.

I still believe that the OT is God's Word, but much of it is unfamiliar to our people, and a lot of that has to do with their apathy towards it. They don't care to learn all about a religion that to which they don't adhere, and in thinking like that they are only thinking like the brain God gave us made us to think. We care if it involves us, and if not, not so much.

When listening, we are constantly asking if this involves me. I'm never going to get as excited about MLK Day as black people, and I don't even know when Cinco De Mayo is celebrated. We care about our own sports team, political party, family history, and religion a lot more than we do about those of other people, and it's okay. It's the way we are made.

As a practical matter, whenever I start talking about the OT, some eyes almost immediately begin to glaze over, and I know that I have a paragraph or two before some nodding actually begins to take place. I'm a good storyteller, and I tell true OT stories well, but I see what I see. Jesus is just more relevant – not to mention more interesting – than OT ritual.

Along those same lines, the ritual that interests Christians is Christian ritual. They want to know why we do what we do when we do it. They need to understand those things we actually do right now so that their doing has meaning. If we don't do that, then those things become more or less empty ritual, and we learn from the OT that God doesn't like that.

13. The crowds put down “τὰ βᾶῖα τῶν φοινίκων – the branches of palm trees” in front of Jesus. Branches would of necessity be limited in number, and other writers tell us that those unable to lay their hands on that put down articles of clothing instead. These days, we are more likely to put out a red carpet to welcome an honored guest into our midst.

The transliterated Greek word is “phoenix,” and the palm branch “is a symbol of victory, triumph, peace and eternal life,” and it was associated with another Jewish festival; Sukkot

(WIK). Jesus knew what was about to happen to Him, He had made that clear to those closest to Him, and theologians and the like wonder what were the crowds thinking?

To be sure, they are thinking that this entrance to Jerusalem is a victory lap, but what kind of victory were they expecting? They were either expecting a military victory whereby He would raise up an army and repeal and replace Roman rule, or they were expecting a much more important victory to come; the coming soon victory over sin, death, and Satan.

Theologians also ponder whether this “hosanna” crowd was the same as the “crucify” crowd. I have always believed that it was, but when has any one “crowd” been composed of the same people as another “crowd?” By the very nature of the thing, each “crowd” is uniquely made up of individuals, and the more people involved, the less duplication.

Maybe, probably some of the people here on this Sunday to welcome Jesus as a king would have by Friday changed their minds about Him and be calling for His execution. Almost certainly, the Friday crowd included people who did not welcome Him on Sunday and who for some time had wanted Him to die. The people who plotted to kill Him, for example

An anxious lot, they did not wait for Jesus to come to them, but “ἐξῆλθον εἰς ὑπάντησιν αὐτῷ - they went out to meet Him.” The penultimate word in that phrase is not the verb “to meet,” but the noun “meeting.” That word occurs three times in the NT, and places the emphasis on the meeting, the event itself, not the act of going to the meeting.

And they were saying things too; “καὶ ἐκραύγαζον Ὡσαννά – and they were shouting ‘save us.’” The word “hosanna” comes from two Hebrews words, both of which appear constantly in the OT. The first, “Yasha” often occurs in the context of fighting or conflict, like when God fights for His people, and it is a request salvation, which comes with victory.

The second Hebrew word, “na” is often used in connection with a request to God, what we would call a prayer or a petition. In this context, their shouting of that word at this man may be seen as their request that He give them that victory. Of course. Who ever wants defeat or prays for it? The “shouting” verb is in the imperfect tense; they kept it up.

That verb κραυγάζω occurs only nine times in the NT, seven of them at the hand of John. It is a term reserved for times when a group of people seem to be in agreement with one another on a particular matter, and their many voices speak as one. The desire of the people for Jesus to bring them a victory – who is going to be against that? Nobody, that’s who.

They shout out other things also; “εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι Κυρίου – blessed is the one who has come in the name of the Lord.” The first word is a compound formed from a Greek adjective and a Greek noun; “good” and “words.” On a fundamental level, it means that they were saying good things about Jesus. But it was more than just that.

The verb εὐλογέω is sometimes used of God, as He blesses people. It is sometimes used of people as they praise God. Here, it is clearly the second, rather than the first; the people are praising Jesus as God, and the verb is in the perfect tense. The effect or results of their completed words of praise carry on into the future. What does that mean?

The participle “ὁ ἐρχόμενος – the one who is coming” is in the present tense, and it puts the emphasis on the fact that Jesus is coming to Jerusalem. Like I said, it was a big deal added to a big deal, and we know that it happened, but some weren’t sure. In fact, it seems to have been a rather open question; whether or not He would go through with it.

We have had the “name” discussion here several times, and His coming “in the name of the Lord” means that He comes with the approval and support of God Himself. The last thing they call Him is the kicker; “καὶ ὁ Βασιλεὺς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ – even the King of Israel,” and we come back to the same question; what kind of a King were they expecting?

14. The donkey must have thrown them for a loop. Why a donkey? Uncle Bill’s answer at FW in the eighties is still the best answer; “It’s not a horse.” John actually calls the animal “ὄναριον – a little ass,” which has “εὐρὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὄναριον – Jesus found a – well, don’t say that from the pulpit. Probably ought to stick with “small donkey.”

Expositors Greek Bible says,

The significance of the “ass” is shown in what follows: “He shall destroy the chariots out of Ephraim and the horse out of Jerusalem, and the war-bow shall be utterly destroyed: and there shall be abundance and peace”. By riding into Jerusalem as king but on an ass, not on a war horse, He continued to claim to be Messiah but ruling by spiritual force for spiritual, ends.

John does not tell us how the donkey came to be, and to be sure, to think of a man leading an army while sitting on a small donkey is nothing short of ludicrous. John mentions the small donkey right after he tells us that the people were hailing Jesus as a King. Besides that, John sees the small donkey as the fulfillment of an OT prophecy, which it is.

15. This is taken from Zechariah 9:9, and it is written in the context of the return from the Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century B.C. Noteworthy is what John leaves out in quoting the verse. He does not speak of the King being “triumphant and victorious,” perhaps to emphasize just that to people who knew the verse from memory.

16. Switching now from “the crowd” to the Christians, John tells us that “Ταῦτα οὐκ ἔγνωσαν αὐτοῦ οἱ μαθηταὶ τὸ πρῶτον – the disciples did not know these things at first.” The verb for knowing is the one used when talking about learning new things; they were learning more about Jesus all the time, and there always is more to learn all the time.

What all is included in the “these things” that they learned? They were not there to see or hear quotes from the OT, but they were there to see and hear what the people were saying about Jesus and how they were acting towards Him. Having been apprehensive of this Jerusalem visit, they learned that Jesus was actually very popular with the masses.

But the real eye opener would come later, “ἀλλ’ ὅτε ἐδοξάσθη Ἰησοῦς τότε ἐμνήσθησαν ὅτι ταῦτα – but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered these things.” The “but” is emphatic, and the verb is in the passive voice; emphasis on the glorification, not on the glorifier, who is God the Father, who actively raised Him from the dead.

Specifically, they remembered two things; “ἣν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ γεγραμμένα καὶ ταῦτα ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ - were written about Him and they did to Him.” The first thing is the OT prophecy quoted by John, and the second thing is what the people were doing to Jesus; acting like He was a big deal and saying those marvelous things about Him and calling Him a king.

Palm Sunday in retrospect has a clearer meaning than Palm Sunday had for those who were there for it. Understood in the context of all of the events of Holy Week, this day takes on new meaning. We who have had two millennia to contemplate it in the context of that much Christian history. The crucifixion, resurrection, and glorious ascension have come.

For those first Christians, that week was the wildest roller-coaster ride they would ever be on. From this high to that low, blood, sweat and tears, Crucifixion to Resurrection, which they finally seem to have gotten their heads around when He came up to Galilee, where they were fishing. And it all came together at Pentecost, when they finally, totally got it.

17. The raising of Lazarus was also a big deal. It was such a big deal that John devotes a large chunk of the eleventh chapter of his twenty-four-chapter Gospel to it. At one point the Pharisees bandied about the idea that they should kill Lazarus as a way to stop people from talking about him and his resurrection.

If we play that out, what would a man who had been dead, and who after four days in the tomb was raised, then do? Likely he would have continued living his life – he lost four days – and then one day he would have died. Living life means that you are going to come into contact with other people, who would know you as That One Guy.

That One Guy who was dead for four days, and then Jesus came and called to him to come out of the tomb, and then he did. I saw That One Guy eying the produce at the grocery store. Ya, he was at synagogue on Saturday, and he looked good! A living, moving, constant reminder to the public of what Jesus had done for That One Guy.

John tells us that “Ἐμαρτύρει οὖν ὁ ὄχλος – the crowd was bearing witness.” The verb is a legal term for what we would call somebody giving an eyewitness account, and it’s in the imperfect tense; they kept it up. We don’t know the numbers, but the raising of the dead man must have been seen by a lot of people, and that was problematic for some.

John says this of those eyewitnesses; “ὁ ὢν μετ’ αὐτοῦ ὅτε τὸν Λάζαρον ἐφώνησεν ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου καὶ ἤγειρεν αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν – being with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead.” They saw with their own eyes that he was really dead, and they saw with those same eyes a living Lazarus, and that was a problem.

So besides Lazarus himself as a constant reminder of that miracle, those who had seen it told others what they had seen; a man dead, then alive. The nature of the event is such that nobody could say you were engaged in trickery or some such thing. A man who had been dead for four days, and “surely it stinketh,” who was now vertical is a pretty big deal.

18. It was that event, and particularly their hearing about it from eyewitnesses, that caused the crowd to swell, “διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐπληθύνθη αὐτῷ ὁ ὄχλος, ὅτι ἤκουσαν τοῦτο αὐτὸν πεποιηκέναι τὸ σημεῖον – because of this also the crowd met Him, because it heard of this miracle He had done.” It’s one thing to heal the sick. Lazarus took it to a whole new level.

The word for “meet” here is a verb in the aorist tense, emphasis on the act, as is the verb for “hear.” The last verb, about Jesus “doing” the sign is in the perfect tense, completed action with ongoing results. For starters, it is noteworthy for John that Lazarus was raised from the dead and that he continues to live in an ongoing manner, walking around and all.

But more than just Lazarus, the ability of Jesus to overcome death means a great deal to all people. The raising of Lazarus by the Son is a precursor to the raising of Jesus from the dead by the Father. Both events bespeak the resurrection of all flesh on the last day; we know that it can be done because it has been done. For the Christian it becomes personal.

19. This entire episode causes the Pharisees to talk to themselves; “οἱ οὖν Φαρισαῖοι εἶπαν πρὸς ἑαυτούς – Therefore, the Pharisees talked (aorist tense) among themselves.” Recall that Jesus had some fans – we only know about those named – among the Pharisees. Nicodemus and Joseph are named, who seem to be going “told you so” on the rest of them.

Some of the Pharisees – none are named – tell the rest; “Θεωρεῖτε ὅτι οὐκ ὠφελεῖτε οὐδέν· ἴδε ὁ κόσμος ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ ἀπῆλθεν – See that you have gained nothing. See the world has followed behind Him.” A little bit of hyperbole, but significant that it is “the world” – which in John has always – along with “the Jews” – opposed Jesus are becoming converts.

Law/Gospel

Not Coming/Coming – The people at the time of Jesus had been waiting a long time for Messiah/The Son of Man. Jesus is The One. The people of our time have been waiting a long time for the Second Coming of Messiah/The Son of Man. He will be here pretty soon,

and in the meantime, we are satisfied that “Lo, (He) is with (us) always” in the Word and especially in the Sacrament, where He is “really present.”

Glory/Suffering/Glory – Jesus left the glory of heaven to come into the world, to save it from itself. That saving required much suffering on His part, particularly on the cross. We have not come from glory, but from sin, and we suffer much in this life, though not nearly as much as Jesus. We will one day share in His Glory.

Sermon Titles

The Man on the Donkey

It's Not a Horse

Hymns

Sing Palm Sunday hymns on Palm Sunday

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

