

Pastor Joe Polzin  
John 12:12-43  
“A Display of True Power”  
Year B – Palm Sunday  
March 25, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’” (John 12:23-24).

Recently in the news, the prospect of military parades has become a topic of discussion again. A military parade is when the armed forces make a public display of its various strengths, personnel, and equipment, not only for the citizens of *this* country to see, but also for all the nations. I found it interesting to read about the various times throughout the history of the United States when military parades have been used, from the end of the Civil War, to during the middle of World War II, and throughout various occasions of presidential inaugurations and the conclusions of conflict. These parades are meant to be encouraging, morale-boosting, celebratory, and a demonstration of the nation’s military capabilities. It’s also meant to show the whole world what kind of power you have.

Today, Palm Sunday, we see once again a very famous parade take place, one known as the Triumphal Entry. And it isn’t a military parade, but it seems apparent that by the reaction Jesus caused, the people of that day may have been thinking many of the same things. This was a king or a general’s welcome to the city. Crowds would celebrate like this when they were welcoming someone who had won important battles on behalf of the people, or a ruler who had achieved great success.

“Hosanna!” they yelled for Jesus, which means, “Save us!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (12:13) Jesus received a king’s welcome. And like a military parade, this entrance was meant to be encouraging, morale-boosting, celebratory, and a demonstration of the capabilities of Jesus, a way to show the whole world the power he had. But the question is, what kind of power?

Certainly the crowds would have had their own expectations of his power. John tells us, “The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had [raised Lazarus out of the tomb]” (12:18). With a leader who can bring people back to life, what could possibly stop him from doing everything they had ever hoped? Healing people, bringing back those who had died. What’s more, demonstrating his power to those in charge. Religious leaders or political overlords, like the Romans, whose time was now seemingly up. For the crowds, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem meant endless possibilities of power.

But is that what Jesus thought? Jesus *was* intending to demonstrate his power on Palm Sunday. But not the kind of power everyone else had in mind. And the first indication of this is his choice to ride not a powerful war horse or chariot, but on a donkey. A humble donkey. And this choice sets the tone for the entire week to come, a week we know as Holy Week. A week where Jesus would continue to demonstrate his power through humility.

Immediately after the parade, Jesus begins to answer some Greeks who wanted to see him, and his disciples. And in doing so, Jesus begins to talk about something that seemed so power-*less*. He begins to look forward five days, to Friday, and he begins to talk about his death.

And isn't death the ultimate antithesis to power? Death stops life. Death means you are so entirely subject to the control of someone or something else, that you do not even have the power to preserve your own life. And it's why no one could comprehend what Jesus was talking about. Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," and coming off the high of the Triumphal Entry, everyone probably thought, "Great, let's hear it! What powerful thing will happen now?" But Jesus begins describing his death, and no one could follow this type of thinking. How can glory, how can power be associated with death?

We all have times in our lives when we experience a moment, or a series of moments, and we feel helpless. We feel powerless. And this is especially true when we or those around us suffer or get sick or even have to face the possibility of death. This reality has been especially present in my life recently, and I'm sure it has for you in your lives, at various times, or maybe even right now.

And we can't help but feel powerless. This fallen world, with the effects of sin, rears its ugly head. And as much time and effort that we spend in our lives building up this semblance of control, as we manage our families, our finances, our homes, our free time, all these things that make us feel like we're in control, it takes only one moment, one diagnosis, one loss to reveal that we're not in control at all. We have no true power.

So, who does? Who has true power? Does cancer? Do tumors? Does evil? Does Satan? Does *death* have true power? Somedays, it seems like it does. But what Jesus said that Palm Sunday, and says again to us today, is that the one who has the true power is him and him alone. Jesus redirects the focus of those around him to see his upcoming death in five short days, and he's preparing them that, although it's going to look like for a time that pain and suffering and death will have power over him, what he's actually doing is reversing all of that.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone," Jesus says. "But if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus will be that grain of wheat. He will willingly and humbly subject himself to the cruelest and most powerful things that Satan, and this world, and even death can throw at him. But like a grain of wheat, which dies in the ground so that new life can come up through the dirt, Jesus will go to the cross, and his body will go into the ground, into the tomb, and he will die. But *because* he dies, he will be able to come out the other side to new life.

*That's* true power. And Jesus alone has it.

Jesus doesn't avoid suffering and death. In fact, surprisingly, Jesus explains that his suffering and death will be *necessary*, necessary for him to show *his* true power. Because it's on the cross that Jesus takes the brunt of the attack that evil and sin are able to mount against him, and it's on the cross that he is able to defeat everything that would try to take him down.

The battle Jesus wages on the cross assures us in days when *we* feel powerless against things like disease, pain, and even death, that we have someone on our side that has the power over all those things. For a short time yet, we may still be subject to them. During this earthly life, we may still remain in the darkness that their shadows cast over us. But they do not have power over us. Jesus does.

And just like the darkness of Good Friday is eventually dispelled by the light of Easter, we know the day is coming when Jesus will return to this earth, this time not in a display of humility and sacrifice, but in a display of his eternal glory and might. The day when every knee will bow at the name of Jesus, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10-11). The day when we will live forever with the one who has power over sin, the power over death, the power over us. Not even our death ends our life. Not when our lives are in the safe-keeping of Jesus.

As we prepare to walk alongside our Lord this Holy Week, and as we observe his Passion, we are reminded that Palm Sunday leads us to Good Friday. The triumph of his entry leads us to humility of the cross. But we also remember, that it is by the way of the cross that Jesus demonstrated what it means that he has victory over sin and death, what it means that he reigns as king, and what it means that he has the true power over all things.

Our sermon hymn put it this way: "Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die. Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, Thy pow'r and reign." It was in his death that Jesus displayed his power. And it is in our weaknesses, and even our death, that Jesus' power will be displayed once again. In his name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.