

Palms, Psalms, and The Patriarch
Psalms 118:19-29

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I'm amazed, time and time again, by the symmetry of our God. How the smallest details throughout the countless ages are woven into an elaborate pattern to proclaim His purpose and power.

This morning's no different. In fact, this morning especially, on this Palm Sunday, we need to understand how God chooses to work in order to understand the shouts of the people.

We need to understand how God chooses to work in order to understand the exultation of Jesus. We need to understand how God chooses to work in order to realize how this day fits into the week that's upon us.

I want us to consider first of all, the Palms and then the Psalms, a patriarch and then the purpose of God.

The scene is familiar to us. We've heard it time and time again, year after year. We can picture it in our minds. Jesus coming down the Mount of Olives and the multitude beginning to gather.

The disciples, full of joy, as they begin to lay their coats before Jesus. The people begin to take the branches, the bows off the trees, waving them.

Then they begin to shout, "*Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

The Passover season was a season of high expectation, of messianic hope. The people waved their branches as they cried out, "*Save us, save us.*" But... did they really know from what they wanted to be saved?

These were branches from the same trees that were waved when Judas Maccabeus and his brothers came and drove Antiochus Epiphanes and the pagans from Jerusalem.

Branches of victory that the little people waved in celebration of God rising up to drive out a superior military political oppressor.

So, again they waved these branches hoping for another victory over the oppression of the Romans. *"Save us,"* they cried. *"Hosanna, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."*

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Like so many times before, the people of Israel had forgotten their past. They had forgotten their history. They had forgotten the promises of God.

To understand what's really going on we need to turn to the Psalms. In particular, Psalms 113-118. They're called the Great Hallelujah Psalms.

They were sung by the children of Israel as they gathered for the festivals, as they gathered for the feasts in Jerusalem. The pilgrims would sing them along the way.

As the people gathered in the courtyard of the temple, they would sing these psalms.

Psalms that formed the structure of their worship and of their praise. These Psalms were a recitation of the promises of God, of the history of God.

In particular, on that Palm Sunday the Psalm that was upon the lips of the people was the 19th verse of Psalm 118, *"Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord."*

This verse was one that called the people to celebration; it called the people to procession. They were lifting up their praise to God, verse 25, *Lord, save us! Lord, grant us success!... Hosanna!*

What's that word? It's Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna. Their cry goes up to God. Not to a military conqueror. Not to a son of Judas Maccabeus. Not to a false Messiah. That prayer was reserved for God alone.

Hosanna, Hosanna, *"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the Lord we will bless you."* Psalm 118 is more than just a cry for salvation.

For within that cry is the answer to the prayer that was prayed. That's why this Psalm was so important in light of the events of Palm Sunday.

Pay attention to the words of verse 27, *"The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar."*

Do you see the imagery of Palm Sunday? Do you see the image of the waving bows? It's already been foreseen in the Word of God.

In the words of the Psalmist, he sees Palm Sunday, but he sees something that the people miss. Where does the victory parade go? The waving of the palm leads to what?

It didn't lead to *Antonia Fortress*, The Stronghold, The Garrison of the Roman Army. The festal parade didn't lead to the house of Pontius Pilate.

The prophetic word doesn't say that, in the time of the coming of the Lord, the Romans would be overthrown. The joy and the excitement of that moment ends at the altar of sacrifice.

Not in the courts of power. Not in the barracks of a strong military force. Not in the mechanizations of leadership. Palm Sunday, in order to be Palm Sunday, must end at the altar of sacrifice.

"Lord save us," they cry as they waved the palms. "Save us through the altar."

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Psalms 118:27, "The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar."

Now, there's something you need to know about this verse. The NIV did a poor job of translating this, but that last sentence of Psalm 118:27 ought to be translated like this: *"Bind the festal sacrifice with ropes and take it up to the horns of the altar."*

You see, the binding is missed in our translation, but the binding is important. The bound sacrifice is at the heart of the Palm Sunday victory celebration.

It's that verse, when it was read to the people of God, when it was sung by the people of God, takes them back into their history.

It takes them from the Psalm to the patriarch. It takes them to a lonely desolate mountain, Mount Moriah. It takes them to the father of their faith. It takes them to Abraham.

Abraham, who in Genesis 22 was tested by God when he was told to take his son, his only son, and offer him as a sacrifice upon Mount Moriah. That's one of the most powerful stories in all scripture.

The ancient patriarch, with shuffling steps, leaving his servants behind, and with his son bearing the wood and the torch, beginning that climb up the mountain.

A sad parade it was, with his son asking innocently, *"Father, I see the wood and I see the fire but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?"* What did Abraham say to his son? *"God will provide the lamb."*

When they reached the summit of Mount Moriah, Abraham bound his son. In fact, in the Hebrew way of telling the story, it's not called the sacrifice of Isaac.

It's called, *"The Binding of Isaac,"* because it's his binding that's so crucial to the story. The willing submission to God.

It was at that moment, when the knife is raised above the throat of his son, that an angel of the Lord intervened...

Genesis 22: 11-12, *"But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*

In that moment, Abraham's attention was turned to the thicket and there was the lamb, caught in the bushes.

Scripture says that Abraham named that place *Jehovah Jireh*, The Lord Will Provide, for it was on the mountain of the Lord that God provided the lamb.

The symmetry of God is coming together. The people, they're crying out for salvation in the words of an ancient Psalm that pointed to the sacrifice.

A psalm that pointed to the promise made to Abraham that God would provide the Lamb.

Israel never forgot the story. They never forgot the provision of sacrifice.

God, when He was instituting the law for the children of Israel, when they were to come into the Promise Land, gathered them together on that first Passover and gave them these instructions.

In Genesis 12, God instructed Moses and Aaron to tell the people, "*On the tenth day of the month of Nissan, you are to choose the lamb for the sacrifice. You are to choose for your household the lamb of sacrifice. You are to bind him and you are to hold him for four days, and at the end of the four days of examination at twilight on the fourteenth day of Nissan, you are to offer the lamb in sacrifice for the sins of your heart and of your children.*"

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What does all this mean to us this morning? What does it mean that we have the waving of the palm branches saying, "*Hosanna save us.*" The words of an ancient Psalm that said, "*Salvation comes through the alter of sacrifice.*"

What do we make of the promise of God to an old man that He'll provide the lamb, and what difference does it make that God said in the book of Exodus, "*On the tenth day of Nissan, you are to choose the lamb for the sacrifice?*"

Let me tell you. We so often we get caught up in the story of the people waving palms that we forget about other things that were happening at the same time.

We get caught up in the waving of the palm branches. We get caught up in the shouts of *Hosanna* and the little children singing, but there's another sound that was just as evident in Jerusalem that day.

It's a sound that we need to hear anew today. If we're to understand why this day is so important in the last week of Jesus's life we must hear all the sounds.

Jesus was coming down the Mount of Olives to the shouts of *Hosanna* from the pilgrims. Yet, the next gate over was the Sheep Gate.

While Jesus was entering one gate, the Bethlehem lambs were being brought to the temple through another.

Somewhere in the courtyard of Herod's temple, amidst the worshiping throngs, the lambs were being brought for selection.

The Bethlehem lambs were brought so the people of God might choose their sacrifice. This was happening at that exact moment that God was bringing His Bethlehem Lamb to the same place.

You see, for the Hebrew, the Jew, the Israelite of that day, that day that Jesus entered into Jerusalem was not Palm Sunday, it was Selection Sunday.

It was the day they chose their lamb for the sacrifice. As the lambs were paraded before the people and the people were choosing their lamb, God was offering the people a choice, too. He was saying, *"Here's my lamb without blemish, without spot."*

Remember what I read earlier. Where God instructed Moses and Aaron that the lamb was to be chosen on the tenth day of Nissan in order that it might be sacrificed on the fourteenth day.

But what went on during those four days?

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During those four days, the priests had to exam the lamb. They had to certify that the lamb was without spot and without blemish. That it was worthy for sacrifice.

For four days, the Gospels tell us, Jesus was examined by the Pharisees, by the teachers of the law, by the Scribes.

They questioned Him. They tried to trick Him. They tried to trap Him, but at the conclusion the Gospel says, *"They kept silent because they could say nothing against him."*

The Lamb was spotless. God took it a step further. He brought His Son, bound, into the presence of the government; the ruler of that day, Pontius Pilate.

We know again what happened, don't we? Pilate examined Him and he kept coming back saying, *"I find no fault in him." "I find no fault in this man."* In other words, *"This man is spotless, He is pure."*

The lamb selected by God. His Bethlehem Lamb was presented before the world. We know what happened. Pilate brought Him out and proclaimed, *"Ecce homo,"* Behold the Man.

Het, a choice had to be made. God brought His selection. The people must make their choice.

On the fourteenth day of Nissan at nine o'clock in the morning the multitudes who had been waiting outside the gates of the temple rush in as the priests open the doors.

Within a matter of moments tens of thousands of worshipers and their perfect Bethlehem lambs are brought to the priests.

There's an assembly line of thousands of priests, standing there as the lambs are being sacrificed and the bowls are being filled.

The blood was being passed and in a moment the marble and the gold of the temple was filled with gore. Blood was running down the gutters in rivers, pouring into the Kidron Valley.

At nine in the morning, God's Bethlehem Lamb was lifted high upon a cross. He said, "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*"

Throughout the day the lambs continued to come. Then at the last hour, the ninth hour, the sacrifice was made for the people of Israel.

The High Priest would take that one perfect lamb, in their estimation, bring him into the Holy of Holies, and offer the blood upon the alter.

At the ninth hour the lamb of God cried out, "*It is finished,*" and the temple curtain was torn in two.

God has rejected the lamb of Bethlehem. He said, "*My Lamb, My Lamb alone can bring salvation.*" The words of Abraham are fulfilled. God provided His Lamb.

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Conclusion

What does that mean for us today on this Palm Sunday? On this Selection Sunday? God's still holding forth His perfect Lamb. He's still offering to the world His choice.

Will you take the solutions of the world that will never satisfy, that will never save, or will you take God's perfect Lamb, whose blood cleanses the sins of the world.

Will you join that group that one day will stand before the Lamb in heaven. Where, clothed in white robes, the festal banners will wave once more, but no longer will the cry be "*Hosanna save us.*"

No longer will the cry be, "*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*" The cry that will go up says, "*Salvation belongs to the lamb upon the throne. We are saved. He has come.*"

We do a disservice when we refer to today as Palm Sunday. I think we ought to recover it's ancient Hebraic roots and once again say, "*It's a Day of Selection.*"

It's a day of choice, "*Who will you choose?*" I challenge you today to choose God's Lamb. Examine Him if you will. Test Him if you will. Try Him if you will, but you'll find that, at the end of the day, He's trustworthy.

That His promises are true. That you can depend upon Him. That your salvation is assured. *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

The Lord is God. He has made His light to shine upon us. With bows in hand, join the festal procession up to the alter, up to the cross, up to Christ.