

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento
on Palm Sunday, March 29, 2026**

As you may have noticed, we are trying out an alternate Liturgy this year. Instead of reading the Passion Gospel in the middle of the service, it will be read at the end. This enables us to focus on Palm Sunday for most of the service, and then experience the Passion Gospel as the transition to the rest of Holy Week. After communion, we will walk with Jesus in his suffering and death.

This new focus on Palm Sunday itself helped me experience the events of the day in new ways. I found myself thinking of Jesus' primal act of obedience, but also of the many times and ways others had to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit for the events of the day to come together. This led me to imagine myself at Palm Sunday, and to think of modern day events that could give us an idea of what Palm Sunday might be like.

How many of us have been present for an event like this? A large crowd is gathered together, seemingly with one will, demanding and expecting change. Matthew says that the city shook. Certainly the authorities, Roman and Jewish, shook. It was clear now that Jesus was really dangerous. A crowd like this is double edged, peaceful for now, but what might happen? We try hard to recreate the day, holding and waving our palm fronds, but I'll be honest, I don't necessarily feel the crowd, or the city shaking.

And yet I think there are events like this in living memory, large gatherings of people that shook the established order, that brought about lasting change. I was born after the March on Washington, but for some of you it is in living memory. As Americans, we sometimes forget or don't comprehend other, more recent events. I remember standing in Wenceslaus Square in Prague, while a Czech told me proudly about the Velvet Revolution. The square was 2-3 blocks wide, maybe 8 blocks long, just huge, and I tried to imagine it filled with people standing shoulder to shoulder. The city shook, and the Soviet sponsored

government fell. Last year, I visited the Baltic Republics, and learned about the Singing Revolution. In Estonia, they showed me the spot where the line started. It was a line of people holding hands, and it stretched without a break for hundreds of miles all the way down to Lithuania. While they stood together, the people sang; there is a great tradition of singing in those countries. That showed the Soviets how deep the desire for freedom was, and the three Republics left the Soviet Union soon after. The line stretched far beyond the cities through forests and farmlands, but still, the cities shook.

Of course, it doesn't always work. I think of the Peace Movement, or even Black Lives Matter, movements that call out loudly, that have right and justice on their side, but leave little lasting change. So what does it take to bring days like these about?

In the case of Palm Sunday, most of all, it takes Jesus' humility, love, and obedience to God's will, and I'll return to that at the end of the sermon.

But it also takes the Holy Spirit, working over a long period of time, to create the imagery and expectation of the Messiah. It takes Zechariah and his vision of the ruler who spreads peace to the ends of the earth, triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey. It takes the Psalmist who celebrated the House of David "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

On the day itself, it takes the Disciples' obedience to Jesus' odd command to go fetch the donkey, and the owner's willingness to let the donkey serve. It takes one person after another, willing to spread their cloak, perhaps their only cloak, in the street. It takes the Palm Branches, and thousands of people shouting and singing Hosanna. And let us not forget Matthew, who, guided by the Holy Spirit, recognized all these signs and wrote them down for us. All of this comes together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the city shook.

So where does this leave us today? Certainly, we should have the awareness that the size of a crowd is no guarantee of the presence of the Holy Spirit. A similar crowd in a few days' time will turn on Jesus, shouting "Crucify Him." Days like Palm Sunday are few and far between,

and don't always deliver what they promise. But with Christians through the Centuries, we learn to find Jesus present now even as we await his return.

In this time of waiting, small acts of obedience and service still work to add up to the picture God is creating. As we follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we become part of the picture God is creating.

After the Eucharist comes to an end, we will turn to Jesus, and remember his ultimate act of obedience and service through the reading of the Passion Gospel. The letter to the Philippians reminds us just how far back Jesus' decision goes, a decision made before his birth. When all had been prepared and the time was right, Jesus became truly human. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, born in human likeness." We remember just how far Jesus was willing to go for us. "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, death on a cross." Matthew gives us a detailed account of Jesus' sufferings, including Jesus' agonized cry on the cross "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" On Good Friday, we will hear John tell the tale, and he will emphasize Jesus' strength. We are given two chances to walk with Jesus, to learn what he went through for our sake.

At the moment of Jesus' death, Matthew tells us that the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, and the earth shook. Not just the city, but the earth itself. As you listen to the Passion Gospel, let it shake you. Let it move you. The Holy Spirit is still at work, gathering God's people together, leading us in ways large and small. As we listen and absorb the reality of Jesus' love for us, we hope, each of us, to become more loving. Its been said many times, but its still true. Only love can conquer hate. And love can shake the world.