

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 24, 2024

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Deeply appreciative this morning for the gifts that are shared in the midst of our children's ministry and the many children that God has called to this place, and particularly this morning those who volunteer on Wednesdays and other times to make sure that our children are able to sing together. This day we will read together a text, and that'll take us back a little bit. Over the last few weeks we have, in the midst of our Narrative Lectionary, been remembering and studying Holy Week itself, right? And so this morning we go back to Mark 11. We'll read verses 1- 11 together. That begins this week that we call Holy. Before we read from scripture together, let us join our hearts in prayer.

Gracious and loving Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning. Give to us a special measure of your peace. Allow it to quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

This is Mark 11, beginning in the first verse.

*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this: 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

*"Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

*Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So we are blessed here at Idlewild to have many children, to have those who are learning and studying scripture together and learning what it means to follow in the ways of faith, and also lead us in worship as they just did. Thinking about the blessing of that this week, because every time we celebrate Palm Sunday, I kind of imagine myself in that space of being a young person again, a child walking down the...the center aisle of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, waving a palm back and forth. We have a little debate about which is the most legitimate palm. We have some leafy palms. Um, growing up we had the...the sharper kind. You might say, um, we've made an executive decision that the sharp ones should go away, and we'll use Eco Palms instead. But as a kid we would bring those things down. We'd fashion them, we'd poke each other back and forth, right?

I was channeling young David this week, thinking about what it was like to experience that celebratory day. I had a difficult time at that age learning to read. Reading wasn't something that I enjoyed doing. I would learn much later in life that I'm a lot better on Audible than I am turning pages, right? And so as an effort to try to help me learn how to read, my mom would find the most engaging books she could. My favorite type of book was a book, a genre called Choose Your Own Adventure. Do y'all remember Choose Your Own Adventure books. The kids at the 8:30 told me that they still exist, they still exist, yeah, so y'all know the premise. If you don't, the idea is you read some number of pages into the book, and the story is going on, and then the question comes up where you get to choose your next

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adventure; and you can choose to continue to read or...or skip ahead to page eight or 14, whatever it is. And it's supposed to be a surprise, right? But I didn't like surprises, so I would turn first to page eight and read how the story would continue, and then I'd turn to page 14, and I'd read how the story would continue, and then I'd go back to page three and decide which ending I liked better. I thought about that this week as we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into the world. I thought about how...I thought about how our perspective can be changed by how the story ends. How the story ends has the ability to change our view of the present moment. The idea that a story can end with death and difficulty—that changes this celebratory day. Many churches—actually in the midst of one hour of worship—they will move from Palm to Passion so as not to miss the dramatic shift that can happen. Palm Sunday reveals to us that the present moment doesn't necessarily let us know what the next moment will hold, or the next. It's true in this story. You know it to be true in your life as well. We can find ourselves in the midst of celebration, and then soon thereafter something changes, and life is altered, and we aren't all that different except the world around us is shifting and changing, and that sometimes changes how we act as well. What I love about this Gospel of Mark, what I love about this scene in the Gospel of Mark is that it reveals that we are indeed like the people gathered on the sides of that parade. We are people who love to celebrate the Savior as they come. We love the idea of rescue, of someone else doing the hard labor for us. We will celebrate that so long as it looks exactly how we would like it to look. This day reveals what the people wanted. They wanted to celebrate the coming of a new type of kingdom, one rooted in their ancestor David, that would come to fruition in their midst; and, yet, Jesus on this day reveals something else. Jesus is actually stubborn I would say, on this day, stubborn about who he is in the face of who the people want him to be. We need to pay attention this morning to who Jesus is not. Although they claim the coming of the kingdom of David in their midst, he comes to them riding humble and on a donkey, a humble public display over and against the power that the saber rattling of the Empire brings. In this moment you can actually tell who's powerful if you've lived long enough. You can actually see how bankrupt the saber rattling is, how the ways in which the Empire tries to exert authority don't actually have eternal ramifications, not in the same way that humility and love and perseverance in the midst of difficulty, not in the ways that they do. Mary, in her call to confession this morning, named that our faith is fickle. And that's another thing that this Sunday reveals, this celebration. The same voices that cry “Hosanna” will indeed cry “Crucify him.” And if we don't see ourselves in that crowd, then we miss the point of this day. Holy Week reveals to us, and Palm Sunday particularly, our fickleness in faith and God's stubbornness in faithfulness to us and to all creation.

Like the disciples, our faith is fickle. We walk away, and so did they. Like the disciples, when it is told to us that one of us will betray Jesus, we say, “Not I.” And then it is I, every time we turn from a neighbor in need, every time we avert our eyes from injustice, every time we allow the powerful saber rattling to rule the day. That's the interesting thing, and the turn about this day for me. The crowd didn't know what they would shout at the end of the week. They were taken up in the hosannas. They imagined the hosannas to be their full identity, but it wasn't.

I was reading one of my favorite theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr, earlier this week. He says this, “Ultimately considered, evil is done not so much by evil people, but by good people who do not know themselves.” The people in the crowd were not evil; they just didn't know or perhaps forgot their fickleness, how easily they could be swayed to turn from the one who came humbly on the back of a colt, proclaiming a different kind of kingdom, turning away from that one and turning to the power that rattled its saber.

This day calls us to pay attention, to pay attention to not only where we find ourselves in the crowd but to fully experience the week that lies ahead. I really hope you're going to come on Thursday evening at 7:00 p.m. and join here in this Sanctuary. I hope that you'll continue in worship with us on Friday evening. I think it's incredibly important for us, if we are to know ourselves fully, to actually fully experience the week, the celebration, and also the turning. This is one of those stories where we're actually able to look ahead and see what's going to happen in the book. And while some might say it spoils it, I would say it actually transforms and it should transform how we move right now in this moment. What we will witness this week is that in the midst of our fickleness, God will establish God's stubbornness of faithfulness and love over and against the powers of this world. When we deny, God will show God's determination. When we walk away, God will draw ever closer to us. May we fully know that to be true

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of God. May we fully reckon with who we know ourselves to be, those who are deeply faithful and those who turn away. May we know a Grace that covers every bit of who we are today and always.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.