

PALM SUNDAY

ATONEMENT AND THE CROSS

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Rev. Dr. Matt Ayars

1.0 INTRODUCTION — PALM SUNDAY

This Sunday is a pivotal moment not only in the Christian calendar, but also in life of the church. This is the last Sunday before Easter Sunday as we close in on the climax of the Lenten season.

Today marks the first day of Holy Week. The week commemorates the last week of Jesus’s ministry on earth.

The days of Holy Week are:

- **Palm Sunday:** This commemorates Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when crowds greeted him by waving palm branches and laying them on the road as he rode into the city on a donkey.
- **Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday):** This day commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, during which he instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion (the Eucharist) and washed the disciples’ feet. It also marks the beginning of the Easter Triduum, the three-day period leading up to Easter.
- **Good Friday:** This solemn day commemorates the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his death at Calvary. It is a day of fasting and penance for many Christians, as they reflect on the sacrifice of Jesus for the redemption of humanity.
- **Holy Saturday (Black Saturday):** This is a day of reflection and mourning, as Christians await the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday. It is a time of quiet anticipation before the joyous celebration of Easter.
- **Easter Sunday:** This is the most important day in the Christian calendar, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It marks the culmination of Holy Week and the fulfillment of the Christian faith’s central promise of redemption and eternal life.

Jesus performed many signs and miracles, but this is the moment for which he came. **He was born to die.**

PREACHING POINT

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS ONE OF SELF SACRIFICE

- Baptism liturgy: “Are you ready to die?”
- “My hour has not yet come.” (Jn. 2:4)

- “...slave of Jesus Christ...” (Rom. 1:1) – bought with a ransom.
- “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

The importance of these events cannot be overstated. The moment of the cross is the redemptive moment in history in which God reconciles an estranged world of rebels to himself. It’s the moment in which he exercises his justice against the world—yet simultaneously—his love.

1.1 WHAT IS THE “TRIUMPHAL ENTRY”?

Our reading from John this morning recounts the historic events of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The Jews at the time were celebrating the Old Testament Pilgrimage Festival of **Passover**.

This celebration commemorated when God accepted a lamb as a substitute for the death of the first born in the story of the Exodus (Ex. 11–19). Overall, the event was a reenactment of the deliverance from Egyptian slavery.

Since the time of Moses, there was the expectation for another deliverer to come from the line of David, and that individual—the Messiah—would rescue the people from their captors (Deut. 18:18). In the case of the Triumphal Entry story in the New Testament, the crowds believed Jesus to be this second Moses and for him to deliver them from their Roman (pagan) captors and re-establish Israelite reign and power in the likeness of David.

Thus, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, they celebrated because they believe he was just days away from launching a militaristic war against the Romans in a fight for Jewish freedom.

They were right about one thing: Jesus is the second Moses who came to rescue them. However, what they were wrong about was the identity of their enemy.

Rome wasn’t the problem. **Sin is the problem.**

PREACHING POINT

OUR ENEMY IS SIN AND THE POWERS OF DARKNESS

- **Ephesians 6:12** – For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

- **Pastor Friend's Advice:** Always remember your fight is not against flesh and blood.
- **Haiti Story:** Abel's lawyers coming to the University Campus.
- **Jesus's betrayal:** Satan entered Judas (on the basis of Judas' sin; Lk. 22:3)

Another dynamic here is the **Jesus came to do something other than what they were expecting.**

1.2 WHY A DONKEY?

Why did the Old Testament (Zech. 9:9) prophesy that the Messiah could come riding on a donkey? In sum, it's because the Kingdom of God isn't like the kingdoms of this world. Status, power, and might is not determined by money, power, and capacity for military force.

Humility and love are the basis for power in the Kingdom of God; it is the basis for Jesus's power. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Jesus doesn't have to force himself on people. **He lets his love draw them.**

PREACHING POINT

WE LOVE PEOPLE INTO THE KINGDOM

- The world will know you by your love (Jn. 13:35; Ps. 133).
- We don't argue people into the Kingdom, we pray people into the Kingdom.
- John's Revelation and dying for enemies.

1.3 WHY "PALM" SUNDAY?

The text notes that the people waved palm branches before Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. The palm branch is a Jewish national symbol of victory and celebration.

They thought they were doing an early celebration of Jesus's victory over Rome.

As Christians, we wave the branches in anticipation for the resurrection.

PREACHING POINT

VICTORY (NOT DEFEAT) IS ALWAYS THE POINT OF ORIENTATION FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

- Funerals and death.
- Hope and the Messianic expectation.

- Hope inspired by the Holy Spirit.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the meaning of the palm branch in the biblical context?
2. Why does Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey?
3. What is the only reason to split a church?
4. Explain the statement "all of God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus."
5. What is the meaning of the word "atonement"?
6. Where in the Old Testament do we find instructions on how to celebrate the Day of Atonement?
7. What are the three Pilgrimage Festivals of the Old Testament?
8. Where in the Old Testament do we find instructions on how to celebrate Passover?
9. What Psalm is the crowd singing when they cry out "Hosannah!" during the triumphal entry?

APPENDIX: THEORIES OF ATONEMENT

In Christian theology, the doctrine of atonement explores the ways in which Jesus Christ's death and resurrection reconciles humanity with God, bringing about salvation. Over the centuries, various theories of atonement have been proposed to explain the significance and mechanics of this reconciliation. Here are some of the main theories:

1. **Ransom Theory (or Christus Victor):** This ancient theory, prominent in the early church, suggests that Jesus' death was a ransom paid to Satan to free humanity from bondage. It emphasizes the victory of Christ over the powers of sin, death, and evil. According to this view, Jesus' resurrection signifies triumph over these powers, liberating humanity from their control.
2. **Satisfaction Theory:** Developed by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century, this theory proposes that Jesus' death satisfied the demands of divine justice offended by human sin. Anselm argued that humanity owed God an infinite debt due to sin, which only Jesus, as both fully human and fully divine, could repay through his sacrificial death.
3. **Substitutionary Atonement (Penal Substitution):** This theory holds that Jesus' death served as a substitution for humanity's deserved punishment for sin. It emphasizes the idea that Jesus took upon himself the punishment that humanity deserved, thereby satisfying God's justice and making forgiveness possible for those who believe in him.

4. **Moral Influence Theory:** This theory, advocated by theologians like Peter Abelard, emphasizes the exemplary and transformative nature of Jesus' life and death. Rather than focusing on the mechanics of atonement or divine justice, it emphasizes that Jesus' sacrificial love serves as a moral example for humanity, inspiring repentance and transformation.
5. **Governmental Theory:** Associated with theologians like Hugo Grotius, this theory suggests that Jesus' death demonstrates God's moral government by displaying the seriousness of sin and the consequences of disobedience. While not a strict substitutionary view, it emphasizes the need for Christ's sacrifice to maintain God's moral order and uphold divine justice.
6. **Recapitulation Theory:** This theory, influenced by the early church father Irenaeus, emphasizes Jesus' role as the new Adam who represents humanity in obedience to God. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus recapitulates or renews humanity's relationship with God, undoing the effects of Adam's sin and restoring humanity to fellowship with God.

These theories are not mutually exclusive, and many Christians find value in aspects of multiple theories. The atonement remains a central and richly debated topic in Christian theology, reflecting the depth and complexity of Christian beliefs about salvation and the work of Christ.

SUGGESTED READING

1. **Five Views on the Extent of the Atonement.** Counterpoints: Bible and Theology. Edited by Adam J. Johnson and Stanley N. Gundry. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019.
2. "The Lord Our Righteousness" by John Wesley in **The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey.** Edited by Kenneth J. Collins and Jason E. Vickers. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013.
3. **The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion.** N.T. Wright. New York: HarperOne, 2018.
4. **The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work.** Joshua M. McNall. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019.
5. **Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ.** Thomas F. Torrance. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014.
6. **Salvation in Fresh Perspective: Covenant, Cross, and Kingdom.** Matt Ayars. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015.