

## **Beyond Triumph**

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Palm Sunday

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Psalm 118:22–23

*“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”*

On the cover of a typical Sunday bulletin in this church you will find artwork selected by Antoinette Richardson—images that announce visually what’s coming for the next hour: the season, the theme, the occasion. If it is true that we eat with our eyes first, it is equally true that we worship with our eyes first.

Which is why today’s bulletin is...a bit underwhelming. More oatmeal than stir-fry. And that’s on me.

It’s words—Chesterton’s poem about the donkey. I didn’t choose it simply because I’m fond of donkeys, but because it announces—brays, really—the theme of today’s psalm: *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”*

Both the psalm and that poem are about the power of appearances to deceive.

And if Palm Sunday is about anything, it is about that.

What we see—and what God sees—are often very different things.

Palm Sunday is about drama. It’s about making a scene: cloaks on the road, palms in the air, a procession that looks like triumph.

But look again.

Because what appears to be victory is already moving toward rejection. What looks like power is already bending toward the cross.

Jesus knew this. He told his disciples—three times—where his life was headed. And he did not flinch. He borrowed a donkey, stepped into the prophetic tradition, and faced what was coming.

And we know something about moments like that.

Even now, as war escalates in places like Iran and across the Middle East, we see images that do not look like triumph—neighborhoods reduced to rubble, families displaced, children caught in the violence.

And yet, amid that devastation, there are quieter moments that rarely make headlines: people carrying one another's burdens, communities gathering to mourn, small, stubborn acts of care and remembrance that refuse to let suffering have the final word.

It is not triumph.

It is grief.

It is witness.

Witness to that stubborn, persistent loving kindness that makes faith more than hollow piety.

And that is precisely where God so often works—not in displays of power, but in the quiet insistence that even here, something redemptive is unfolding.

Which brings us back to that strange parade.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is deliberate—planned, visible, unmistakable. A public act of witness. Even a kind of street theater.

There were instructions. Matthew tells us Jesus sent two disciples to borrow a donkey and a colt—his reading of Zechariah's poetry. The point, of course, is not spectacle but humility: not a warhorse, but a young donkey. How threatening can that be?

There were crowds. Energy. Expectation.

And yet beneath all of that, something else is happening.

Because while Palm Sunday looks like a story about triumph, it is really a story about seeing—and not seeing.

The crowd sees a king because they want a king.

They had wanted one for a very long time. A thousand years earlier, the prophet Samuel had warned them what kings would do—how they would exploit, conscript, and take. And the kings did exactly that.

Now they wanted a different kind of king—one who would save them from kingly oppression.

And so they cried out that word we only hear today: *Hosanna*.

Not “Hurray.” Not “Yippee.”

But: *Save us. Please. For God’s sake—save us.*

The crowd was seeing a king.

God was revealing a cornerstone.

And those are not the same thing.

“It was a mixed crowd,” the Gospels tell us—hopeful, suspicious, divided.

But perhaps more deeply: it was a crowd that did not understand what it was seeing.

Do we?

Do we fully understand what we’re doing in Iran? What we’re not doing in Ukraine? What we did in Afghanistan? In Vietnam?

Do we fully understand Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

How does a majority Christian nation justify incinerating 70,000 to 80,000 human beings in an instant—and the thousands more who died later?

We live in the shadow of those decisions still.

And as we push another nation further into a corner, I hear Jesus’ words: *“Forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.”*

The crowd on Palm Sunday thought they knew.

They were looking for the obvious.

But God was working through the overlooked.

They were looking for conquering, shock-and-awe power.

God was revealing suffering, serving, enduring power.

They were looking for greatness.

God was offering something they might reject.

And that brings us back to the psalm:

*“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”*

That line doesn’t just describe—it diagnoses.

Because we are builders.

We make choices. We sort, evaluate, accept, discard. We decide what matters.

Strength. Success. Visibility. Youth. Beauty. Money. Certainty.

These are the stones we tend to choose.

We pick leaders like racehorses. We bet on winners.

And success comes at a price.

“What does it profit,” Jesus asked, “to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul?”

We’re watching that question play out even in our entertainment. In the Forsytes, Soames insists, “We can’t afford to be sentimental,” and Jolyon asks the better question: “Can we afford to be human?”

Because it is costly to be human.

Just ask Jesus.

We invest our money, time, and energy expecting returns—security, comfort, power, prestige.

And we are constantly told where to look: look here, look at this success, this image, this achievement.

Don’t look there—at the poor, the marginalized, the detained, the bombed.

Reject those stones.

But the psalm insists: the stone we reject—the one that seems weak, obscure, insignificant—that is the one God chooses.

We believe that. We can’t prove it. But we believe it.

Palm Sunday exposes the gap between what we value and what God uses.

Because Jesus enters Jerusalem with no warhorse, no force, no domination.

Just a borrowed donkey. A vulnerable body. A path to a cross.

Underwhelming.

And that is the point.

Jesus had already told them:

“Take up your cross.”

Not exactly a recruitment slogan.

He told them what awaited him—and perhaps them. No wonder they ran.

But what he did was courageous. Faithful. True.

The empire that crucified him? Gone.

The city that rejected him? Ruined.

But the church—especially in the global South—thrives, gathers, proclaims.

Truth, it turns out, has a way of outlasting power.

Though it comes as a mixed blessing: both gift and demand, promise and cost.

We live in that tension.

We hope for one thing and receive another. We build carefully and still something is missing.

And often, what we overlook—what we dismiss—is where God is at work.

This is not abstract.

Think about the people whose work sustains the world quietly. No parades. No recognition.

Until something happens.

I’ve been at enough hospital bedsides to know how quickly the illusion of self-sufficiency collapses. A fall, a stroke, a diagnosis—and suddenly the most important people in your world are the ones we noticed least and paid least.

What seemed small was never small.

What seemed invisible was essential.

Palm Sunday invites us to see again.

Because the one entering Jerusalem will be rejected.

By the powerful.

By the crowd.

By the builders who think they know what matters.

And still—God chooses that one.

Not despite rejection—but through it.

This is God's pattern.

Not the impressive, but the overlooked.

Not the obvious, but the ordinary.

Not success, but faithfulness.

A manger. Fishermen. A cross.

None of it looks like a cornerstone.

And yet—*this is the Lord's doing*.

Which leaves us with a question:

What stones are we rejecting right now  
that God intends to use?

A person.

A season of life.

A limitation.

A grief.

Even something within ourselves.

We discard these things.

God does not.

The cross makes this clear.

It is failure by every human measure.

And God does not erase that verdict—but transforms it.

Rejected → foundational.

Insignificant → decisive.

Invisible → the beginning of resurrection.

So Palm Sunday is not just celebration.

It is perception.

Learning to see as God sees.

To notice what is quiet, hidden, easily dismissed.

And that is our calling:

To notice.

To notice the people who sustain life.

To notice quiet acts of care.

To notice grace in ordinary days.

Sometimes the extraordinary breaks in—9/11, a pandemic—and for a moment we see clearly. We remember Italians leaning out of windows, banging pots and pans to welcome exhausted hospital workers.

Why did that stop?

Why do we forget so quickly?

When we notice, we recognize.

When we recognize, we participate.

We become part of what God is building.

And we begin to question even the structures we take for granted.

As Joanna Johnson argued, perhaps even the foundations of our nation—the Constitution itself—require deeper scrutiny, not minor adjustment. Systems can preserve inequality as easily as they promise liberty.

We must examine not just the structure—but the foundation.

*“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”*

Not because we are wise.

But because God is.

Not because it is obvious.

But because God sees what we cannot.

So as we move toward the cross:

Do not look for triumph as the world defines it.

Look for the hidden work of God.

Look for the overlooked stone.

Look for the quiet grace that refuses to be dismissed.

Because that is where redemption begins.

And that is where—by God’s grace—it continues.

Amen.