

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
Palm Sunday  
April 9, 2006

### **Driving Out the Enemy**

Mark 1:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 16-20?

Everybody loves a parade.

(Everybody on the side of the winning team, that is.)

That's because, before the advent of the Macy's Day parade,  
and its ilk,

a parade usually meant people were celebrating  
*a victory!*

Think of the Steelers Super Bowl Victory Parade,

clogging up the streets with euphoric, nearly riotous, crowds:  
that's what a real parade is all about!

None of this float competition business,

with cosmetically enhanced celebrities

reading cheesy, canned scripts from the teleprompter.

A parade is about exulting, gloating, soaking up the feeling of supremacy  
that comes after a major victory over a dreaded enemy.

That's the kind of parade the people had in mind

as they laid down their cloaks and leafy branches for Jesus  
as he rode majestically in to Jerusalem.

Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem

was not the first time the people had brought out their cloaks  
and cut fresh branches for such an occasion.

This kind of parade had become a tradition in Jerusalem,

a tradition inspired by other victories in the memory of the Jews.

Each year they would tell the story from their great grandparents' day

when the people carried palm branches

to celebrate the victory of Jewish forces over a Pagan fort

which had been built in Jerusalem.

When the fort was captured and its occupants destroyed,

and the cry of jubilation went up that

"God had completely crushed their powerful enemy."

And then there was the celebration of the Jewish hero Judas Maccabeus,

who had recaptured Jerusalem, restored the Temple,

and destroyed the foreign places of worship which had been

set up in the city.

The celebration of that victory became a yearly festival –  
a festival known as *Hanukkah*, also celebrated with palm branches.

Palm Branches and Parades were meant for  
Great Leaders and Military Victories.

Shouts of *Hosanna* meant “Salvation”

like that of the Maccabees saving the people from an occupying force  
by driving out the enemy from their midst.

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Have you ever wondered why Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem  
is called his “Triumphal Entry”?

He hasn’t exactly triumphed yet, has he?

In fact his victory has never yet been in greater jeopardy  
than as he rides – unarmed – into the hands of his enemies.

Jesus’ triumphal entry, over branch and cloak,  
develops a very different twist –  
a twist which many of the people  
will not be prepared to accept from their Messiah.

In Jesus’ time it is the powerful Roman Empire that has  
occupied Jerusalem.

And if the people are shouting *Hosanna*,  
they are not so much shouts of exuberant celebration  
as much as spirited *expectation*  
as they anticipate the military victory  
they hope Jesus will achieve.

But as events unfold on Jesus’ last earthly entry into Jerusalem  
the people who shout *Hosanna* will quickly be disappointed,  
disillusioned, and given into despair

as Jesus, without even a modicum of resistance,  
allows his enemies to take him into court,  
unjustly accuse him,  
and hand him over to the Roman occupiers  
to be crucified.

If we are going to understand Jesus as a victorious Messiah,  
our understanding of victory is going to have to undergo  
a major alteration.

Jesus gives us a clue to that new understanding,  
early in the gospel of Mark,

when he defines his ministry on as one of  
*binding the strong man and plundering his house.*

While the imagery sure sounds a lot like the way earlier heroes  
had treated the invading pagan enemy,  
the context of Jesus' statement makes it clear  
that he was not speaking about an earthly enemy,  
but about Satan as the "strong man"  
and "his house" as the powers of sin, evil and death.

Satan, the Prince of Demons, is in the New Test ament,  
a symbol of the principalities and powers at work upon the earth.  
Powers that have been created by God,  
but have become corrupted and distorted  
so that they no longer serve God's life-giving purposes  
but now work toward the destruction of life;  
political powers, economic powers, cultural powers, social powers,  
and the powers that eat like a cancer at the depths of the soul.  
The NT portrays Satan as the arch-demon,  
the mastermind behind the work of these powers,  
and we see how these powers do their work  
when Jesus encounters Satan during his 40 days in the desert.

Having won his first victory in the desert,  
Jesus defines his ministry as one of "resisting" Satan,  
of *binding [this] strong man and plundering his house.*  
We see Jesus' life-giving power at work when he casts out demons,  
heals the diseases of the people, and even raises the dead!

One day, when Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man,  
he discovers the demons name: *Legion,*  
because, says the demon, we are many.  
By naming these demons, he binds them  
and drives them into a herd of swine  
which immediately rush over a cliff into the sea  
and are drowned.

Later when Jairus, a leaders of the synagogue,  
asks for Jesus' help for his daughter, who is near death,  
Jesus responds, but is delayed on the way.  
When he finally arrives on the scene,  
Death has invaded Jairus' house, and claimed the little girl;  
the people are weeping as those who are conquered,  
and when Jesus comes, they mock his faith

that the child is only sleeping.  
Jesus puts them out of the house,  
enters with the girl's parents and his disciples  
and plunders Satan's spoils  
by reclaiming this little girl from the jaws of death.

Again, when Peter rebukes Jesus for foretelling his suffering and death,  
Jesus sees Peter as a spokesman for the powers  
which would entice him to take up arms against his enemies  
and fight for justice with swords and armies.  
But, as he learned so well in the desert, Jesus resists this temptation.  
he looked at his disciples and rebuked Peter and said,  
*Get behind me, Satan!*  
*For you are setting your mind not on divine things*  
*but on human things.*

In his resistance of these temptations,  
Jesus does not annihilate the Strong Man by committing  
violence against people,  
but binds Satan's power, and reclaims the spoils of Satan's house.

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And so do we resist.  
On Palm Sunday, we march in festal procession  
and we shout and sing *Hosanna, Lord Save.*  
With Jesus,  
we know we are confronting a Strong Man  
more powerful than Caesar,  
more crafty and threatening than Bin Ladin,  
more unpredictable than any rogue nation.  
These enemies of ours, may be in league with the Strong Man,  
may collude with the principalities and powers that work against  
God's life-giving purposes.  
But we cannot help but recognize that these same deadly powers  
are at work in the dark corners of our own souls,  
when we see our enemies as less than human,  
when we hate ourselves for our own sins,  
when we are greedy, and selfish, gluttonous, jealous,  
and despairing and calloused.  
The Power of Death occupies our minds and hearts,  
and works against us, uses us like the demon-possessed  
to work against the goodness and life of God's creation.  
This is the enemy Jesus rides into Jerusalem to meet.

He has met this enemy for 40 days in the desert,  
and again and again throughout his ministry.  
Now, one last time, he intends to meet the enemy of death.  
He willingly enters the Strong Man's house,  
to bind him, and drive him out for good.

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So it is with Jesus that we have walked through these 40 days of Lent.  
We have found ourselves in the caves with the demoniac,  
possessed of powers that control us;  
we have fallen easily into cynicism and despair,  
joining in the mocking laughter of those who wept  
for Jairus' daughter;  
like Peter, we have sought every other remedy,  
every other means of escape from our prison  
in Satan's house – but to no avail.

Now we come with Jesus to the darkest hour.  
We join with Jesus for a nighttime raid into the shadows  
of the Strong Man's house.  
Now we must be prepared to stand firm, to resist with Jesus,  
to keep our long-suffering compassion when we are betrayed,  
to endure with courage the agony of Good Friday,  
to wait in patience through the eerie Silence of Saturday.

Our day of exultation will come, but only at the highest cost.  
We carry our palms today,  
but soon we must go with Jesus to Dark Gethsemane,  
and follow behind our Lord as he carries the cross  
to Golgotha.  
Do not go into this week without prayer.  
The victory is assured in Christ,  
But we must expect temptation until our last breath.

Draw near to God and trust that,  
Jesus is at work, driving out the enemy before you.  
In your darkest hour, be still and know that  
Victory belongs to the Lord.