I think that I have this rant every Palm Sunday in regard to the Gospel reading, so we might as well stick with tradition. My rant concerns the fact that the Palm Sunday’s readings are really more of Good Friday’s readings, making this a very confusing day. Sure, right at the beginning of today’s service we read the Gospel bits that explains why this is called Palm Sunday. Then we just kind of forget about it and skip on ahead to the crucifixion. But this year I am going to take a stand and put the palm back in Palm Sunday. And so today, let’s actually talk about what this day is supposed to commemorate – palms, triumphal entries, hosannahs and donkeys.

And with this goal in mind, I want to discuss two things which are: What is today all about and what does that mean for us? First, in defining what today is about, we need to look at Jesus. Throughout the Gospels, looming in the background, there has been the idea of Jesus and the Disciples going to Jerusalem. While today the entry into Jerusalem has a triumphal feel, up until now the mentions of Jerusalem have tended to be more ominous. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel we read, “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Going to Jerusalem had been established as something both necessary and tragic, which makes the excitement of today seem a bit out of place. But more on that later. Now to point number two about the meaning of Palm Sunday, which is intertwined with who Jesus is. Up to this point in Matthew’s Gospel we have gotten some glimpses of what the reality of Jesus’ Messiahship would look like. Very early Matthew established that there was a kingly nature Jesus coming to earth. For when we first meet the Wisemen, back in Chapter two they ask, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” But Matthew also early on seeks to establish that this kingship will have a much different nature than the way in which kingship is generally conceived of on earth. During the temptation of Jesus by Satan we read, “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” Jesus responds to the idea of being an earthly king by saying, “Begone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” And so, if we had been reading Matthew’s Gospel for the first time and not known anything about the Palm Sunday story this is what we would have come in knowing – something bad is about to happen and this royal welcome that Jesus is receiving seems a bit misplaced, because Jesus’ kingship will not be conventional in any sense. The crowds are making a pretty big deal of things, throwing their cloaks on the road while others cut branches and spread those along the road. But notice what Jesus is doing, he is riding on a donkey. I realize this was a different time, but I am pretty sure, even then, if you wanted to make a statement about your personal greatness you probably wouldn’t pick a donkey as your vehicle of choice. And so, we have this contrast between a reception fit for an earthly king and Jesus not playing the part by riding in on a donkey further defining what he is all about.

And so, what do we take from all of this? The two main entities in today’s story, Jesus, and the crowd, seem to be on two different pages. One is trying to fit Jesus in the category of earthly king while Jesus is practically shouting at them that they have it all wrong. The crowds are expecting something big and yet Jesus enters in a rather small way and the big plans he has seem to be that of being crucified. And I think the takeaway for us, just as it would have been for the crowds back then, is that we may need to adjust our understanding from what we think God should be doing to what God is actually doing. All through Jesus’ earthly ministry he was told that he was doing the whole Messiah thing wrong and today with the triumphal entry you almost get the feeling that the crowds are going to give Jesus one more chance to get it right. They have the fete all planned out, now all Jesus needs to do is act the part that they have assigned him -- come in on a warhorse, chase the Romans out, reestablish the throne of David and so on. But he doesn’t do any of that and we all know how that will work itself out in a few days. But as I said with my opening rant, we are not skipping ahead, which means we need to draw a lesson from today and ask when are we like the crowds? When do we have everything all planned out and all God needs to do is show up and follow our stage directions?

As you have heard me say on countless occasions, I believe an understanding of God like that of the crowds is part of the reason for the decreasing attraction of religion in our day and age. In a consumerist society, things are only good to the extent that they help us fulfill our wishes and desires. If we go to church and pray and then if the thing for which we prayed doesn’t happen, we happily conclude that there is no real need for God – he doesn’t listen to us and our great ideas. Think about this. We live in an age where there has never been a greater ability to satiate our desires. I mean if at any point during this sermon your mind wondered and you realized you really needed a cordless robotic pool cleaner, you could pull out your phone, and with a few clicks it would be on your doorstep by Tuesday – Solomon in all his glory could never have pulled off that feat. And yet despite our ability to summon up our every most desire within moments, we are miserable. I honestly don’t think you could find any objective observer who would look at our society and say that we are happy and content. And so maybe we need to adjust our expectations, maybe we need to look and see what God is actually doing and participate in that- rather than demanding that God fulfill our every wish and desire.

Here is a little story about me and hopefully it illustrates my point. In 2013 I was offered the job of Administrative Dean at Nashotah House. I took the job. There were probably some altruistic reasons for my decision, but I think the main one was I thought it would be really cool to be a dean in academia. Well, my four years in the position were probably the most unhappy years of my life. When I left there and deployed to Qatar to unwind, I devised a new plan. We would stay in Wisconsin until Meredith graduated from high school and then we would move on. Well, something funny happened in those years. I stopped being miserable and was reasonably happy most of the time. Amy and I concluded that even though we had had followed my plan to be a dean, which was a mistake, God had somehow worked through that and put us in the situation he wanted – being a dean at Nashotah was my idea while staying here as a Rector was God’s idea. One sounded better and the other was better.

As we enter into Holy Week, it might be a good idea not to skip ahead and see how it all ends, but rather take it as it comes. Not trying to put our own stamp on things but rather watching and seeing what God is doing so that we may be his this day and forevermore.