

Palm Sunday / Sunday of the Passion • April 5, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Mark 11:1-11, 15:1-47 (Philippians 2:5-6)

"Hype, Humility, and Authority"

Hype, humility, and authority: they're all around us. We're probably most familiar with **hype**, the practice of building excitement and interest in a particular subject. Every summer, or around the awards season, movie-makers try to benefit from hype as the word-of-mouth spreads, looking to build the best opening-weekend income they can muster. Companies try to build hype through celebrity endorsements or viral marketing, spreading the word that you *need* to buy what they're selling. You might even hype up restaurants or books that you like, sharing your enthusiasm with your friends. **Humility**, on the other hand, is kind of the opposite of hype. Instead of extolling virtues, humility is the practice of modesty. In truth, we're likely a lot more familiar with *humiliation* than humility. Humiliation is generally public – someone getting put in their place, as it were. Humility, in its unassuming nature, does not draw attention to itself. Genuine humility is selfless. And while humility might be in seemingly short supply, authority abounds. **Authority** isn't just the ability to make something happen. Authority includes the power to make decisions. It is power that is given, and people like teachers, police officers, doctors, and kings exercise authority as part of their vocations. Hype, humility, and authority.

There was a lot of **hype** surrounding Jesus as he came up to Jerusalem. The "Triumphal Entry," as it's called, gives Palm Sunday its name: the crowds gathered to see Jesus, taking leafy branches that they had cut in the field, to lead his way into the city or to follow along in the train of the procession. These people were excited – or curious, at least. The word of mouth had spread. They'd heard of Jesus and the amazing things that he'd done, including bringing dead Lazarus back to life. Could he be the promised Messiah, God's anointed one? People said that the Messiah was a deliverer, that he would free God's people. Many of those in the crowd that day were hoping that someone would come and kick out the Romans, who were the latest in a long line of foreign nations that ruled over Israel and the Jews. Many expected the Messiah to be a political savior and a mighty ruler, a new King David. The hype pointed to Jesus. Some of those present at the triumphal entry recorded in Mark 11 probably understood that Jesus was indeed the Christ, and that his kingdom was not of this world: that he was not a political or military leader who would overthrow the Romans and restore the land to the people. Even though we do not know what each person expected of Jesus, what hype they'd heard, we do know that they cried out "Hosanna!" "Save us!" You'd think that with all this hype, the great deliverer would process into the city mounted on a mighty warhorse. But what kind of savior comes into town riding on a colt?

Beyond the hype, our readings today point to Jesus' **humility**. This Sunday is also known as the "Sunday of the Passion." Because this is the opening of Holy Week and the last Sunday before Easter, we remember the Passion: Jesus' trial, suffering, death, and burial. In his account (which we just read in our worship service), Mark records the last days of Jesus' earthly life – the terrible things that happened to this man who was just triumphantly welcomed into Jerusalem as a savior only a few days earlier. When Christians refer to Jesus' humiliation, we're not specifically pointing to this suffering at the hands of the Sanhedrin or the Romans. Jesus' humiliation wasn't something that was done *to him* by outside forces; it is his willing action, coming from his humility. As we read in Philippians 2, Jesus humbled himself, setting aside the glory and honor that were rightfully his as God, becoming a human being – even one who would die on a cross. Jesus practiced the most radical humility in the history of time by coming down to be one of us, to answer our cry of "Hosanna!" His humility is an expression of his love for you and me.

In addition to the hype and humility, today's Scripture calls us to consider Jesus' **authority**. Pilate called Jesus the "King of the Jews," as did the people who mocked him as he hung on the cross. But unlike an earthly king, Jesus' authority does not come from his ability to exercise dominion over his people or to punish them; instead, it is based in his willingness to *save* them. Jesus' authority is connected to his humility: for six hours on Good Friday, Jesus was lifted up on the cross, his throne, where he answered the people's cry of "Hosanna!" Because of his humility, his Father "highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name," as St. Paul also writes in Philippians 2, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." In the Passion account, we see the sign that God the Father accepted His Son's sacrifice. When Jesus died, the inner curtain of the temple, which separated the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place, was torn in two, from top to bottom. On the cross, Jesus saved us from an eternity of separation from God: he paid for the forgiveness of all sins. And now he has the authority to serve as our mediator, the authority to allow direct access to the Father, the authority to save.

How does the **hype** around Jesus affect your life? Who do you expect Jesus to be? Some people think that following Jesus means that they'll receive great material blessings, that he'll take all their problems away and they'll live happily ever after. Others consider Jesus to be a wise man, a moral teacher who shows people how to live a good life. There's plenty of hype out there, pointing in different directions. But those of us who do believe that Jesus is God's Son seem to struggle with sharing the good news of his love with the world. We have an easier time telling our friends about the movies we think that they should go see! Hosanna!

To what extent do you practice **humility**? Modesty does not come naturally to us: we want to be known and appreciated for our works. We want to be recognized and valued for the good things that we have done. Should that recognition fail to materialize, resentment and entitlement can swoop in and sour a once-cheerful mood. Setting aside self-interest in loving service to others can be a very difficult act. We'd rather not put off our comfort or popularity or schedule to obey God's command to love those who are outcast, or those who persecute us. Hosanna!

Is Jesus the **authority** in your day-to-day living? We might eagerly recognize Jesus' authority when we know we need forgiveness, but how often do we ignore that same authority when it would conflict with our personal plans and passions? Jesus lives and reigns with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet we mock him like the people who passed by the cross whenever we pretend that we don't need to obey God's instruction. How can those who hope to follow Jesus constrain their will and live as people under Jesus' authority? Hosanna!

Hype, humility, and authority. By God's grace, we have that mind among us which is ours in Christ Jesus. By God's grace, we can know Jesus rightly, feeling his forgiveness and sharing it with the world. By God's grace, we may practice humility, looking to the interests of others in addition to our own. By God's grace, we shall bow our knee and submit to Jesus' authority in every aspect of our living.

As we enter into Holy Week, the high point of the Christian year, come before our Lord, knowing that he will hear us when we cry out, "Hosanna! Save us, dearest Jesus!"

Amen.