Palm Sunday. Or is it Passion Sunday? This is perhaps the strangest Sunday in the Christian calendar. Every year, churches across the world mark this Sunday with palm fronds or palm branches and hosannas. We imagine the great Jesus Christ riding triumphantly into Jerusalem. We imagine what a hero he was. How popular he must have been, for all those people to throw palm branches and cloaks onto the road to pave the way for Jesus. How beloved he must have been, for all those people to shout “hosanna.” Or really – what enormous confidence people must have had in Jesus. The word “hosanna” has come down through the generations as a word of praise and celebration. But “hosanna” has a more particular meaning than that. The word “hosanna” comes from a Hebrew phrase that says: “Save, we pray.” In other words, the people believed that Jesus could save them – probably from whatever was oppressive in their lives, whatever caused their suffering. “Hosanna!” they cried. “Save us! We know you can!”

The people seemed to have great confidence in Jesus, and Palm Sunday reflects a spirit of great celebration as we remember the joy of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The story is vibrant with the cries of celebration and hope. But it never feels right to me to let that be the whole story on Palm Sunday. When I was growing up, this sense of triumph and these hosannas were the whole picture of what the church did on Palm Sunday. But for some decades now churches have moved away from stopping at the point of “hosanna.” The lectionary calendar of assigned scripture readings for this Sunday of the year includes a full reading of the entire passion story. The full text for this morning from Mark’s gospel would begin with the first verse of chapter 14, as we did this morning. The reading would then continue all the way through the final verse of chapter 15, where we would read that Jesus was laid in a tomb and a stone rolled across the opening to that tomb in order to seal it shut. We started the reading of the passion texts right where the lectionary would have us start, but then we skipped parts. The full reading of scripture is perhaps four or five times as long as the pieces we heard this morning.

That word “passion” has always been confusing to me. It is a Church tradition to refer to the period of Jesus’ suffering and death, that stretch of time from his arrest to his crucifixion, as the passion – the passion of Christ. And this is simply because the Latin root of the word “passion” means suffering. So we call this day Passion Sunday, as well as Palm Sunday.

It has never felt right to me to let Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem be the whole story on Palm Sunday. We know what is coming. We know how fragile this moment of celebration is. We can remember that people seemed to celebrate Jesus on that day, and we can imagine a moment of popularity in the bigger story of Jesus’ life. But we do have to remember the bigger story, and we particularly have to remember the part of that story that follows after the celebrated entry in to Jerusalem. Because it is only days later that Jesus is betrayed, arrested, denied – and worse.
Today is the last Sunday in the season of Lent, though the season itself continues through Saturday, continues for still six more days. On these Sundays in Lent you have heard me speak about covenant – about the sacred agreement that forms the basis for the enduring relationships between God and humanity. The central covenant for people of faith is the covenant where God makes a promise to us: I will be your God, and you will be my people.

This Sunday in the Christian calendar, this Sunday when we remember both palms and passion, drives home the point that humans can be terribly unreliable partners in a covenant agreement.

The heart of the relationship between God and humanity is this agreement, this covenant: God will be our God, and we will be God’s people. This covenant comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, from what Christians call the Old Testament. But the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament both say more than that, about the relationship between God and humanity. Our scriptures give us guidance as to what it looks like to be God’s people, and in this area Jesus is our primary guide. When someone asked Jesus what the first or greatest commandment was, Jesus said: “The first is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.” If you were to open your Bible and re-read our first scripture from this morning, where we hear the crowd shout hosanna, and if you kept reading straight through without skipping ahead to that moment when we read that the religious authorities were looking for a way to kill Jesus – if you read straight through the parts of Mark’s gospel that come after the Palm Sunday reading and before the Passion readings, then you would find the passage where one religious leader asks Jesus what the first commandment is. In Mark’s version of the story of Jesus’ life, Jesus teaches the greatest commandment after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and before he is arrested. And I think this teaches us something about what unreliable covenant partners we humans can be.

God calls us to love God and our neighbor – to live this love with everything we’ve got. But what we witness in the biblical story and in our world today is that humans have the capacity to be incredibly violent. The events of this last week of Jesus’ life remind us just how broken we are as a human race – that we could be motivated to wish for another person’s death. And whenever humans perpetrate violence, we break the fundamental covenant between ourselves and God. We violate God’s will and God’s deepest hopes for who we can be as human beings – God’s hope that we can be a people who love God and love one another. This is a painful reality to look at, and we see it again every time someone is murdered or executed. It is a painful reality to look at. But it is important that we do not give in to the temptation to look away. It is important that we do not skip from Palm Sunday’s hosanna to Easter’s alleluia without having the courage to look at what comes in between.

If we do palms without passion we risk falling into the temptation and tendency of our contemporary society – the desire to always look on the bright side; to protect ourselves; to turn away from pain and suffering. But we are called to follow one who did not protect himself, who did not turn away from the pain and suffering of the world in which he lived. As those called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to plumb the depths of life’s experiences, and not to remain comfortably in the shallows.
As difficult as it is to follow this call, this is one of the greatest gifts of our faith. The Christian faith equips us to face suffering and death head on. Jesus faced suffering and death head on. I don’t believe God willed the violence that Jesus suffered. But I do believe that when Jesus confronted the reality of an oppressive status quo backed by military might, Jesus chose to continue on his life’s path. We are called to stay faithful to him as he travels this path, and as we see this path reflected in the realities of oppression and violence in our own world. Christians are not called to bury our heads in the sand. One of the greatest gifts of the Christian faith is the invitation to be so courageous that we will face the realities of our world head on. Head on, with all of the horror and grief that will cause us to feel – all the horror and grief that that is the appropriate response, to the violence of Jesus’ death, and the violence of our world. We are called to be courageous, to face these things head on. And God promises that we will not be stuck forever in our feelings of horror and grief. God gives us a glimpse of more to come, giving us a way to imagine that there is yet hope for this violent and broken world. God’s message to us is that even when the reality of our world is painful and violent, that reality is framed within a more enduring reality – the reality of hope, and new life.

Humans broke the covenant in Jesus’ day and humans still do break the covenant: humans continue to perpetrate violence. But Jesus did not break the covenant. Jesus remained nonviolent in the most extreme of circumstances. Jesus’ own faithfulness to the integrity of his path is a part of the hope that frames our understanding of these events.

So do not let your experience of this week end this morning. Come and receive the great gift of the Christian faith. Come face the events of this week, and find your courage bolstered for facing the events of our world. Our faith can help teach us how.

Come experience the full drama of Jesus’ final week. On Thursday we mark the night when Jesus shared a meal with his disciples for the last time – the night when he gave a new commandment to his disciples – the night when he washed their feet. It was the night when Judas betrayed him and led the authorities to Jesus so that they could arrest him. When we gather for worship on Thursday evening this week – at 7:00 – these are the events we will remember. We will feel their impact, and reflect upon their meaning, and imagine ourselves as players in this old, old story.

The next day the religious authorities took Jesus to the Roman political authority, Pontius Pilate. That day is the day we now observe as Good Friday – the day when Pilate sealed Jesus’ fate and advanced the punishment of crucifixion. We worship again at 7:00, and remember the pain of Jesus’ suffering and death.

Because we can have the courage to face the pain of Christ’s journey, and the pain of our world.

Stay with us this week. Don’t shy away. Don’t skim over this part. The courage we find in facing the full span of the Christian story is the courage we need for living faithfully in a hurting world. Amen.