

The Risk of Palm Sunday
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Palm Sunday commemorates the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem. We are told in the Gospels of Jesus traveling through villages having a successful ministry, telling people parables and healing people. He said his goal was to return people to the practice of Judaism as it is described in the Scriptures. According to the Gospels, many people followed him and supported him. Feeling powerful, Jesus and his disciples decided to confront the Roman occupiers and the Jewish priests who were collaborating with these occupiers in the capital in Jerusalem during the Passover festival.

The earliest gospel is the Gospel of Mark, written around 70 years after the birth of Jesus. This is followed by the accounts of Matthew and Luke, both written about 85 years after the birth of Jesus. These three Gospels do not mention palms, but instead say that people put down their coats and leafy branches on the path to greet Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. Therefore, we should call this “Coat Sunday” or “Leafy Branch Sunday.” The Catholic Church in 1970 renamed today as “Passion Sunday” instead of “Palm Sunday.”

However, the name Passion Sunday has not taken hold. It is John’s Gospel, written about 125 years after the birth of Jesus, where the word “palm” is used in describing Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem. That is where the name “Palm Sunday” comes from.

Palm Sunday is not about chocolate bunnies or colored eggs. It is about a man and his followers confronting power and calling for change. Listen to the words of Luke’s Gospel:

He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this: ‘The Lord needs it.’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying,

*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!*

*Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”
He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize

the time of your visitation from God.” Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said,

“It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

Now by changing only a few words in this story, we can better understand the meaning of Palm Sunday. A retired colleague, the Rev. David Rankin, wrote this passage:

Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, “See, we are going up to Washington, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.”

When he had come near Bethesda and Chevy Chase, outside the city limits, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the town ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt that has never been used. Take it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing it?’, just say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

As he rode along, a very large crowd spread their coats on the ground, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. As he was now approaching Pennsylvania Avenue, the whole multitude began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice, saying,

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you, and surround you, and crush you to the ground.”

Then he entered the capitol building and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of compassion,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Every day he taught in the capitol. The chaplains, the reporters, and the politicians kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

--From a sermon given March 24, 1991, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan)

Palm Sunday is a celebration of courage. It is the story of how Jesus deliberately traveled to the centers of power. This week we saw a modern example of courageous participation in public life, which I will describe shortly..

William J. Fallon was born in New Jersey in 1944. He earned a diploma from Camden Catholic High School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. He graduated from Villanova University in 1967, entered the Navy and was designated a naval flight officer upon completion of flight training in December 1967.

William Fallon began his naval aviation career with a combat deployment to Vietnam. He served in flying assignments with attack squadrons and carrier air wings for 24 years. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991 he commanded an attack squadron on a carrier in the Persian Gulf. In January 2007, President Bush nominated Fallon as Commander of the United States Central Command. Secretary of Defense Gates called Fallon "one of the best strategic thinkers in uniform today."

However, sometimes it is the people in the military who have had the most experience with war who turn out to be the most effective spokespersons for peace. In May of last year Admiral Fallon said "We have to figure out a way to come to an arrangement with Iran." In September he criticized those publicly urging war with Iran, stating "This constant drum beat of conflict is . . . not helpful and not useful."

And in a interview published in *Esquire* magazine, Fallon says that he is determined to draw down the number of soldiers in Iraq. The article quoted Fallon as saying he wants troop levels in Iraq down now. He said he wants to move dramatically in the time he has remaining, however long that may be. And he gets frustrated. He said "It grinds my teeth at the pace of change."

Two thousand years ago Jesus found that when he entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, the authorities were not pleased. William Fallon's most recent interview with a magazine was similar to overturning the tables in the White House.

Last Tuesday Secretary of Defense Robert Gates abruptly announced the resignation of Fallon. He stated that Fallon's reason for resigning centered on the controversy regarding the article in *Esquire* magazine that described him openly criticizing the Bush administration. I am accustomed to the current President ignoring the sermons of liberal ministers. However, I am struck by his practice of ignoring the wisdom of his own military commanders. As Admiral Fallon discovered, even a respected 40-year career in the military is no protection.

Admiral Fallon is the latest U.S. military commander to openly question the policies of President Bush. Over 30 other admirals and generals have gone on record disagreeing with the President's decision making.¹ These are not pacifists; these are career military men, each with over 30 years of military service. In many ways I would disagree with Admiral Fallon and these other military leaders, but I admire their courage in standing up to President Bush.

March 20 is Maundy Thursday, which in Christian tradition commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus with the Apostles. Here in the United States March 20 will also mark the fifth anniversary of the start of the Iraq war. Our nation has been on a perilous road for five long years. Still, the willingness of our military leaders to speak out gives me hope.

While it is difficult, and sometimes leads to the cross, the story of Palm Sunday calls on us to find the courage to look for the larger good, to speak and act based on love and reason instead of ideology and fear.

As a believer in nonviolence I find hope in the fact that even in the highest ranks of our nation's military there are those who have the courage to sacrifice their careers to speak out in support of peace. Palm Sunday is a celebration of courage. As Jesus warned:

Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

i. Those who disagreed included Maj. General John Batiste, Maj. General Paul Eaton, Maj. General Charles Stannick, Lieut. General Gregory Newbold, General Wesley Clark, General John Shalikashvili, Lieut. General William Odom, Lieutenant General Robert G. Gard, Jr., USA (Ret.); Lieutenant General Claudia J. Kennedy, USA (Ret.); Vice Admiral Al Konetzni, USN (Ret.); Lieutenant General Charles Otstott, USA (Ret.); Vice Admiral Jack Shanahan, USN (Ret.); Major General Eugene Fox, USA (Ret.); Major General John L. Fugh, USA (Ret.); Rear Admiral Donald J. Guter, USN (Ret.); Major General Fred E. Haynes, USMC (Ret.); Major General Melvyn Montano USMC (Ret.); Major General Gerald T. Sajer, USA (Ret.); Major General Robert H. Scales, USA (Ret.); Major General Michael J. Scotti, USA (Ret.); Brigadier General David M. Brahms, USMC (Ret.); Brigadier General James Cullen, USA (Ret.); Brigadier General Evelyn P. Foote, USA (Ret.); Brigadier General David R. Irvine, USA (Ret.); Brigadier General Richard O'Meara, USA (Ret.); Brigadier General John K. Schmitt, USA (Ret.); and Brigadier General Stephen N. Xenakis, USA (Ret.) Gen. Joseph Hoar, USMC (Ret.) and Rear Admiral John D. Hutson, USN (Ret.),