My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our Lenten contemplations, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Our Gospel reading for Palm Sunday begins like a spy novel. Jesus draws two of his followers aside. He gives them a mission. “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.’” The two disciples go and find the colt. The question is asked, and the password is given. The Lord needs it.

It’s an odd beginning to an odd story. Arrangements are made and plans formulated, and in the end the transfer goes off without a hitch. It’s a little bit Jason Bourne, a carefully planned out raid to get the colt. But it’s also a little bit Captain Jack Sparrow, isn’t it? “Hey, you, why are you taking it? Me? Because it’s needed. The LORD needs it, OK?” Like many things in the Bible, though, God’s plans seem to work out just a little bit incredulously when it comes to Jesus. But it’s a fraught space that, if we didn’t know the outcome, could result in the triumphant parade into Jerusalem or the whole lot of them thrown in jail for stealing. Freedom v. Captivity.

In the next scene, Jesus is no longer the orchestrator of events, but someone literally going along for the ride. The disciples bring the colt and “set Jesus on it,” which could mean anything from giving him a boost to physically placing him there. The energy is now coming from those surrounding Jesus. They are the instigators. The people throw their cloaks on the ground before Jesus as he starts the ride down the mountain; if you’ve ever been to Jerusalem, you’ll know that it’s surrounded by hills and you have to ride down into a valley to get into the city. They sing praises to God “for all the deeds of power that they had seen.”

Our story ends with Jesus in conversation with some Pharisees, who ask him to make his disciples settle down. Luke does not tell us why they do this. Maybe they look upon these folks like we might some rowdy fans who are whooping and shouting a little too much. Or maybe, with so many tourists in Jerusalem for Passover, they’re worried about a mob effect kind of disturbance by these Jesus groupies. Maybe they are genuinely concerned for Jesus’ safety. Whatever their intentions, Jesus’ answer is this: “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” ***Well***. Told them, didn’t He.

I don’t know what to make of this story. But I also don’t know what to make of our typical Christian observance of Palm Sunday. Because we purchase allllll these palm branches, and hand them out after blessing them here in front of the church. Then we wave our branches and singing, Hosanna! Loud Hosanna! Or some other celebratory hymn. And we try to sing and wave all simultaneously, which seems easy, but it’s not. It’s a heartwarming scene when we’re all here doing the opening waving and looking at each other. But a cloud of doom also looms because we know the ending of the story of Easter Week. Our shouts of praise are heartfelt; there is nothing cynical in the waving of our branches.

Yet we know what will happen soon. We know what it means for Jesus to set his face to enter Jerusalem for the last time. There is a dissonance inherent in our observance. We cheer as Jesus rides to the city that will soon kill him. We are somehow, in our remembrance of this event, cheering Jesus as one of the crowd, knowing that we will, as one of the crowd, be crucifying and killing Jesus in only a few days.

So part of me agrees with the Pharisees who try to stop this cheering. Part of me wants to say, “Heeeyyyy! Let’s tone it down a little. Can’t you see where this is leading? Don’t you know what is waiting in Jerusalem? This is a funeral procession, not a parade. Put the palm branch away. Use your quiet voice.”

But then there’s that last sentence of our scripture. “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” Jesus’ words challenge us to take another look—to reconsider the scene, to turn our eyes from what we know lies waiting up ahead and instead focus our full attention on the one astride the colt. Jesus, in all his fullness of being human and divine. Jesus, lord of our hearts and souls.

Jesus’ words challenge us to recall his many deeds of prophecy fulfilled, and healing, and teaching, and just plain being, and to offer praises to the God who sent him into the world. To recognize Jesus for who he is and join in singing, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

So I guess we’ll tell the story of Palm Sunday again this year. We’ll watch a little nervous as those two intrepid disciples make their rendezvous with the owner of the colt. We’ll relax once we’ve witnessed the sign and the countersign, and once the locals don’t really challenge these two strangers leaving town with a prized colt. We’ll laugh as some joyful rowdies hoist Jesus onto the colt’s back. We’ll allllll take palm branches and march and shout and sing and join the crowd walking with Jesus toward Jerusalem. And, yes, we’ll be aware of that little black raincloud starting to build and the distant rumble of thunder as it follows us into the city and gets ever more menacing through the day and the week. It’ll be right there in front of us and unavoidable.

So I guess once again we will refuse to let it dampen our enthusiasm for this opportunity to raise our voice to God, and say, for today, we are so glad and grateful for all that is done. We praise you God, for giving us this time with Jesus, we praise you for just this day. For it is enough. We will thank God for waking us up this side of the daisies to do good work in the world and singing songs of gladness, fearing not those clouds nor winter's chilling breeze; By and by the harvest, and the labor ended, we shall come rejoicing, bringing in…the Palms, not the sheaves, that comes later, bringing in the Palms, right? I told you this was confusing to me. As Frank Sinatra once sang about confusion and wonder, “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered am I.”

But whatever we are bringing in, we do all this not as an act of denial of what comes next but as an act of worship of God’s glory. The part of us that thinks it’s all too much—too loud, too celebratory—will be asked to take a seat. If we don’t sing, the stones will shout out. So we may as well sing. We may as well sing praises to God and to the Christ whose deeds of power have been seen by us.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

The Palm Sunday story calls us into a liminal space—this in-between space—into the space between freedom and captivity, companionship and betrayal, outrageous joy and unspeakable sorrow, life and death. Somewhere between Bethany and Jerusalem a parade is forming that also, in a certain light, looks like a funeral procession. We know what is coming, but we are not there yet. We are in between and we are asked to sing. It is uncomfortable, singing even as we weep. But it is the way of discipleship.

Discipleship that we are called to handle, and that we can lean on each other this day, and every day, to affirm that no matter what befalls us, we are grateful that we have each other to make it to the other side. So bring in the Palms. We’re ready.

Thanks be to God, Amen.