Imagine not one, but two, processions marching into Jerusalem on this day long ago. Two competing processions entering the Holy City from opposite sides.

At the eastern gates of Jerusalem, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, rides into Jerusalem on a big white stallion, surrounded by foot soldiers clad in armor, carrying shields, swords and lances.

Pilate loathes Jerusalem, with its stinking markets, crowded streets and unruly Jews.

Pilate prefers living in his seaside retreat in Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast where the air is cool, and life is calm.

But Pilate is the governor, and so Pilate must be in Jerusalem because the Jewish Passover is about to begin. Passover always means trouble. So, Pilate enters the city with a show of force.

The soldiers shove people out of the way. Anyone too slow is trampled underfoot.

The historical record tells us that Pilate was known as a particularly vicious governor, even by Roman standards. He did not hesitate to execute anyone he perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a threat.

Pilate ruled for ten years, from 26 to 36 C.E., until he was recalled by Rome for his misrule. He was too brutal even for them.

And then picture this other procession entering Jerusalem from the western gates of the holy city:

A Jewish holy man – a rabbi, Jesus – rides into Jerusalem not on a warrior’s stallion, but on a peasant’s donkey. He is surrounded not by soldiers but by common people wearing simple shawls, tunics and sandals. They spread palm leaves in his path.

By some estimates there are as many as 200,000 pilgrims – mostly poor peasants – flooding into the holy city for Passover, and they want to see and touch this Jesus, who they have heard so much about.

Two processions on this day:

One with soldiers brandishing weapons.

The other is with common folks waving palm leaves.

One procession demands respect at the point of a sword.

The other procession, by its very existence, challenges the legitimacy of the forces carrying swords.
Were there actually two processions on that day? Historians tell us it is plausible, and it might even be the reason we remember the procession of palms—which was, in its way, a protest march against the Roman Empire.¹

The Roman authorities most certainly would have seen the peasants and their palms as an insurrection in the making—and the Romans would have met them with zero tolerance.

Jesus, the Jewish holy man at the center of all this attention, most assuredly would have been quickly arrested, as indeed, Jesus is arrested that night.

Countless others—those holding those palms—they, too, would be scooped up and killed in the days ahead, most of their names obliterated from history without trace.

And so, the story of the Passion in this holiest of weeks begins again: The procession of Jesus into Jerusalem greeted with palms, a Passover dinner with his disciples, his arrest in a garden, and words that Peter will live to regret:

“I will never deny you. Never. Not me.”

Today we journey into this ancient story of hope and betrayal, courage and cowardice, fear and tragedy. We descend again into the valley of the shadow of death, and we are haunted by the specter of evil and fear.

Because we know how the story comes out, we might be tempted to skip past this and get straight to the lilies of Easter.

But don’t. Don’t skip past this week.

This Holy Week let the story unfold for you one day at a time. Enter into each scene, one frame at a time. Maybe notice something you’ve never noticed or heard before.

Today, hold onto your palms a little longer, for today we venture into the Upper Room with Jesus as he shares his last meal with his closest friends, and we hear how their hearts are about to be broken.

We go to the garden with Jesus to pray, and we see him arrested. We watch as Peter follows at distance, and then when he is confronted, he collapses in fear.

And then we pause here, for now.

We do something different this Palm Sunday: Rather than reading Luke’s entire Passion narrative from start to finish—jamming all of Holy Week into a single reading—today we stop at the disturbing moment when Peter weeps bitterly.

We might ask: Why is Peter so afraid of being identified as a follower of Jesus? He is the rock, the brave one. He has gone with Jesus this far. Why now does he cower in fear?

There is something in the story I have not noticed until this year:

It’s the courtyard.

In the book of the prophet Jeremiah 32: 2, written 600 years before the time of Jesus and Peter, there is mention of this courtyard.
In Hebrew, the literal translation is “the court of the target” – the place where palace guards take target practice.²

Target practice consists of thrusting spears into targets – human targets: prisoners, religious zealots, and people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

For at least 600 years, this courtyard is known as a place of terror and death.

For Peter to stand in this courtyard is to stand at the very gates of Hell – and Peter knows it.

No wonder he is so afraid.

And would we be any different than Peter in this moment?

We are asked to sit with this and other questions this week.

As this week unfolds, we will remember again moments of great courage, moments of pain and great weakness, and finally the spectacular moment of Resurrection and the new life promised to all of us.

And it all begins today with palm leaves in our hands.

Easter will come, but not yet.

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