

Sit Up

John 12:12-19

March 24, 2024 Palm Sunday Series: *What are you UP to?*

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!"

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

"Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

Here we are on Palm Sunday — the last Sunday of Lent, and our gateway into the trials and triumphs of Holy Week. The invitation is to wave our palms and think about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We shouted, "Hosanna!" which means "Save Us" and "Help us". We'll sing the lofty verses of "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," at the end of the service. A majestic hymn. An annual special day in many churches. Maybe we wonder what kind of parade this is we are reenacting.

When I was growing up in church, Palm Sundays had a cheery warmth about them. I'd feel happy when I waved my palm branches down the center aisle of my church sanctuary. Happy to know that after years of obscurity, ridicule, and caution, Jesus enjoyed a fleeting but heartfelt outpouring of praise from his followers.

If someone had told me back then that the Triumphal Entry was a joke, and that the comic satirist was Jesus, I would have been shocked. But now I know.

According to New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, the Triumphal Entry was *not* a spontaneous event. Jesus was not the passive recipient of impromptu adoration. Rather, Jesus' parade-by-donkey was a staged joke. It was an act of political theater, an anti-imperial demonstration designed to mock the obscene pomp and circumstance of Rome.

In their compelling book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*, Borg and Crossan argue that *two* processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday; Jesus' was not the only Triumphal Entry.

Every year, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. Why? To be present in the city for Passover — the Jewish festival that swelled Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000. The governor would come in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome was in charge. They could commemorate an ancient victory against Egypt and their escape from slavery if they wanted to. But real, present-day resistance was futile.

Here is Borg and Crossan's description of Pontius Pilate's imperial procession: "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

It's important to remember that according to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome; he was the Son of God. For the empire's Jewish subjects, Pilate's procession signaled more than a military threat. It was the embodiment of a rival theology. Heresy on horseback.

As Pilate clanged and crashed his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approached from the east, looking (by contrast) ragtag and absurd. His was the procession of the ridiculous, the powerless, the explicitly vulnerable. As Borg and Crossan remark, "What we often call the triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission."

Elsewhere, Crossan notes that Jesus rode "the most unthreatening, most un-military mount imaginable: a female nursing donkey with her little colt trotting along beside her." In fact, Jesus was drawing on the rich, prophetic symbolism in the prophet Zechariah.

I have no idea — and the Gospel writers don't tell us — whether anyone in the crowd that day understood what Jesus was doing. Did they get the joke? Did they catch the subversive nature of their Jesus' donkey ride? Jesus chose an animal that had never been ridden before. Was he telling them that his kingship, his Way, was a new and uncharted one? A risky one? Did they hear him?

I suspect they did not. After all, they were not interested in theater; they were ripe for revolution. They wanted — and expected — something world-altering. An ending-to-the-story worthy of their worship, their fervor, their dusty cloaks-on-the-road.

What they got instead was a parade of misfits. A comic donkey-ride. A dangerous joke. As New Testament scholar N.T Wright puts it, what they got was a mismatch between their outsized expectations and God's small answer.

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that Jesus' political joke hastened his crucifixion. He was no fool; he knew exactly what it would cost him to spit in Rome's face. Like all good leaders of change and satirists, he understood that real humor is in fact a very serious business; at its best, it does more than entertain. It points unflinchingly at truth — the kinds of truth we'd rather not see. The kinds of truth we'll *kill* not to see.

Jesus embodies a different kind of power, a truth about Divine love and power and justice. A kingdom of peace, a kingdom of justice, a kingdom of radical and universal freedom. A kingdom dramatically unlike the oppressive empire Jesus challenged on Palm Sunday.

Today is the threshold moment, the liminal space, between now and Easter morning. The week begins with an ecstatic, "Hosanna!" and it closes with a heartbreaking, "Crucify him!"

We remember Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers and confronting religious leaders for turning God's "house of prayer for all people" into an emporium for profit-making. We see Jesus rejected by those in power, we see justice miscarried, and we even see friends who betray, deny, and abandon Jesus in his hour of need.

We hear what may be the most difficult cry in all of literature, when Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is a week that speaks to the most challenging trials that we can face; "Holy Week."

We cannot get into Jesus' head, to see how he is able to have such resolve in the face of torture or maintain love through broken friendships. We cannot get into the head of Judas, who once intended to follow Jesus but, in the end, betrayed him. We cannot even get into the head of Simon Peter — who wants to be the first in line and say just the right words and then denies Jesus. What we can do is to read the story, see the good and the bad, the hope and the suffering, the ambitions and the failures, to reflect on our own journeys.

There are many times when a crowd will get it wrong, but the parade on Palm Sunday was not one of them. They saw something that the world will usually miss. They perceived the kindness, the compassion, the gentleness, and said, "Look at this. Could this be the One? The one who can save us from ourselves?" Maybe they wanted a different way to be in the world.

Thinking about the crowd that day, aren't **we** tired of the hatred, the division, the senseless attacks? Aren't we repelled by the mistreatment of a good person? Aren't we numb from the 24-7 revelations of senselessness of war? Aren't we ready for it all to stop? Of course we are. And the crowd cheers when the humble man rides the unbroken colt into the city. For the moment, they understand. They see the alternative to anger, destruction, and oppression. And then, a blink or two and it's back to the usual ways. The haters will conspire. The story unfolds. It looks hopeless on Thursday and Friday.

The church calls this week “Holy Week” not despite the suffering but precisely because of the suffering that it contains. Not all suffering is holy, of course. Too much suffering in the world is the result of sinful violence, injustice, avarice, and hate. That kind of suffering – especially the imposition of it and any facile attempt to legitimize it – is damnable and I am not romanticizing or idealizing it.

However, there is a kind of suffering and grief that comes from the *vulnerability of loving*. As Glennon Doyle writes, “Grief is love’s souvenir. It’s our proof that we once loved.” Jesus’ grief, so evident in his prayer in the garden and his cry from the cross, was born out of his love. And, likewise, when we lose someone whom we love, when we are betrayed by someone whom we trust, when we are abandoned by someone on whom we rely, we suffer. While their actions may be tragic or inexcusable, our grief itself is a sacred part of our existence. When we suffer because we love, we shed holy tears. It is not a part of our life that we like to think about often, so this week offers us the chance to embrace that vulnerability, to open ourselves to grace, and to know that Christ himself is part of our company in our tears.

Look at both this powerful love and beauty and the real suffering and sadness. That is the invitation. This is what I saw when I watched a documentary of someone who did this. The documentary is “American Symphony.” It follows musician Jon Batiste who is brilliantly creative as a musician and composer. On the same day he is nominated for 11 Grammys, his partner and now wife Suleika Jaouad goes to the hospital and learns that her long-dormant cancer has returned. She has leukemia. She is a writer and artist. Together they face the hardest days of suffering and treatments and pain and fear. And they celebrate Jon’s joy in performing music. In the hospital corridors & home, dancing and praying, weeping and singing. I need that reminder. To sit up and notice what is happening, be present to all of it and to turn to the eternal source of love, the Holy, the Christ.

If I live in a world that's full of pain, mystery, and contradiction, then I need a spiritual life robust enough to bear the weight of that messy world. I need experiences of the Holy that empower me, in Richard's Rohr's words, "to live in exquisite, terrible humility before reality."

Will we choose the humble and the real? Or will I insist on the delusions of empire and old stories that are not deep or broad? Will I accompany Jesus on his ridiculous donkey, honoring the precarious path he has chosen? Or will my impatience and pessimism and cynicism undermine my journey?

In the end, my solace is this: I am known and held by a God who is too big for thin, one-dimensional truths — even my own, most cherished, one-dimensional truths.

We are coming to the end of Lent and themes of *what are you up to? What is Jesus up to?* Make no mistake, the powers that be in Jerusalem sat up and took notice at the actions of Jesus and his motley crew of palm waving followers. It was a show of power of love. It was a

non-violent man sitting up on a on a donkey. Will we sit up and take notice of injustice and work to eradicate it in ways that honor that first Palm Sunday parade?

Welcome to Holy Week. Here we are. We are not alone on this journey. Here are our hosannas, broken and earnest, hopeful and hungry. Here is all that is unbearable, and the promise of a surprise, an unexpected hope, when the women arrive at the tomb. Amen.

Resources

Mark Davis, St. Mark Extra! 4/8/22

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/St--Mark-EXTRA-.html?soid=1102441261857&aid=y7hSV3t3Y9Y>

Debi Thomas, "The Clown King," Journey with Jesus, 3/29/15

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3637-20150323JJ>

Marcus Borg and John Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem*. (2008 Harper Collins)