

3.29.26 Sermon on Matthew 21:1-11

Yesterday, my kids and I were gathered on the Capitol lawn. There was almost a festival atmosphere as they ran around, blowing bubbles, getting their faces painted, playing with other kids, and occasionally taking a few minutes to pause for a snack or a drink. Hundreds were gathered around for the No Kings rally. Signs and car honks abounded. When I think about the scene, I imagine there were some similarities between yesterday's scene and the one that unfolded in Matthew's gospel – kids ran around, weaving in and out between the adults, knowing that the day wasn't quite like most other days. There would have been that buzz, that same kind of hubbub.

But on that day, there were two parades happening in Jerusalem, and that's where we need to begin – because if we only imagine Palm Sunday just as a sweet, spontaneous celebration with children waving branches and people laying down cloaks, then we miss what Matthew is actually showing us. The Palm Sunday processional is not just a parade. It is actually a counter-parade. Perhaps it might even be more apt to call it a protest.

On one side of the city, entering from the west, would have been the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, riding in from Caesarea. He would come with war horses, with soldiers, with banners, with the full visible force of the empire behind him. It was a show of strength, a reminder that Rome was in charge. It was full of pomp and circumstance. It was full of powerful symbols and mighty proclamations.

But then, on the other side of the city, entering from the east, is Jesus. He does not come riding on a warhorse, nor is he surrounded by soldiers. He comes instead on a donkey – on a pack mule. Matthew wants us to see that contrast – and that contrast becomes even more powerful when we realize that Jesus is staging this counter-parade with Scripture. Every detail of this scene is pulling on threads from Israel's story that the crowd would have recognized, even if only half-consciously.

Matthew tells us this outright: "This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet..." And then he points us to Zechariah: "Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey..." We probably hear that and think of it as a gentle image, but in its original context, this is a declaration that war is ending. Just a few verses later, Zechariah says this king will cut off the chariot, the war horse, the battle bow. This is not just a humble king. This is a king who dismantles the whole system of violence. When Jesus rides in on a donkey, he isn't just being peaceful, he is making an even greater claim: The war horse does not get the final word.

There's another layer to this imagery, too. This isn't the first time someone rides into Jerusalem on a donkey to be recognized as king. In 1 Kings, when David is near death, he

places Solomon on his own mule and has him paraded into the city. The people shout, and celebrate, and declare him as king. In this moment, Jesus is stepping into that memory as he echoes Israel's monarchy. But he is also critiquing it – because Solomon's kingdom, despite its wisdom and glory, was a kingdom built upon heavy burdens – slavery and economic exploitation. The monarchy became a part of the problem the prophets warned about. Jesus evokes that story, but he refuses to repeat it.

Then there are the palm branches, which are not just decoration. They are symbols of resistance, used in moments of national hope, especially during the Maccabean revolt. During those revolts, which took place around 150 years before Jesus, the Jewish people rose up against the Seleucid Empire and reclaimed the temple. And when they did, they celebrated by waving palm branches as a symbol of liberation.

So by the time Jesus enters Jerusalem, those branches are not a neutral symbol. They are a loaded image. They are a memory of resistance and liberation from empire. When the crowd waves them for Jesus, they're making a claim: "This is the one who will set us free." As they wave the branches, the crowd shouts, "Hosanna," which means "save us." It's a prayer, a protest, and a confession of hope all at the same time.

With all of these symbols, what we find is prophecy, memory, resistance, and worship, all coming together in this one moment. And really, it isn't just symbolism. It isn't just a protest. It is actually street theater. Jesus is not just teaching something in this procession. He's staging something. This is a public, embodied act, right out in the open, in the middle of the city, during Passover, when tensions are already high and Rome is paying close attention. Jesus sends the disciples ahead with instructions. He arranges the scene, he chooses the animal, he enters at just the right moment. This is intentional; this is a performance.

Everyone watching would have understood that Jesus was doing something important here. They knew what Pilate's procession looked like. They knew what power looked like. So they would have also known that what Jesus is doing here is almost satirical, like a kind of holy parody. Across town, Rome would have been saying "This is what power looks like." But here, Jesus says, "No, *this* is what power looks like." Rome would have been staging dominance through military display, while Jesus stages his kingdom through vulnerability and humility.

And the crowd joins in this counter-parade, this bit of street theater. They become a part of the performance. They become a part of this act of public theology that points to a different kind of king and a different kind of a kingdom.

Our own moment today is not so different. We are still surrounded by kingdoms that operate like Rome did – with systems built on domination, fear, control, and exclusion. We are still living under an empire that seeks to assert its dominance through military might.

And every so often, people begin to push back against that type of kingdom. Some of you were also at the third No Kings rally yesterday. The No Kings movement is not a single organization so much as it is a posture of refusing unchecked power, which has a long tradition in our own country's history. It's insisting that no human authority should demand ultimate allegiance. At its core is a rejection of domination. I couldn't help but think that it felt appropriate to push back against rising authoritarianism just before the start of Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

But here's the tension Palm Sunday invites us to sit in: as Christians, we also say, "Christ is King." But what do we actually mean by that? If we're not careful, we can take the language of Jesus' kingship and turn it into the very thing he came to undo. We can say "Jesus is King" while imagining him as just a better version of Caesar. We can claim his authority while still clinging to the logic of domination (which, by the way, is exactly what Christian nationalism does).

But Palm Sunday won't let us do that, because the king we see here is fundamentally different. This king, Jesus, does not conquer, nor does he coerce. He does not dominate, he comes in humility. He comes in peace, and love, and within a week, this king will be crowned, but with gold, but with thorns, and his throne? It will be the hard wood of the cross.

So maybe the most faithful way to understand all of this is: No kings like the kingdoms of this world. No kings who rule by fear. No kings who demand domination. No kings who build power on the suffering of others. No kings, except this one who redefines everything, where power looks like service, and strength looks like self-giving love, where the kingdom is not built by force, but by compassion.

If Palm Sunday is a piece of street theater that invites the crowd to join in, then we, too, are invited to follow this different kind of king and to embody his kind of kingdom. That means we strive to build a kingdom where people are not discarded or dehumanized, but where the vulnerable are given seats of honor. It's a kingdom where human dignity is not earned, but rather all are recognized as beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold. It's a kingdom where forgiveness, not vengeance, is the currency.

The Rev. Benjamin Cremer writes this: "We want the warhorse. Jesus rides a donkey. We want to take up swords. Jesus takes up a cross. We want the Eagle. The Holy Spirit

descends as a dove. We want the roaring lion. God comes as a slaughtered lamb. We keep trying to arm God. God keeps trying to disarm us.”

Perhaps today, this Palm Sunday story leaves us with some questions to ponder as we enter Holy Week. Where are we still cheering for the wrong kind of king? Where are we still longing for power instead of peace? Where are we still tempted to trade the way of Jesus for something that feels stronger, faster, more effective?

The truth is, sometimes the way of Jesus can feel too small, too vulnerable, or too slow. I mean, riding a donkey does not exactly look like a winning strategy. Love does not look like it can stand up to an empire that is ready to squash you at the slightest hint of resistance.

And yet, this is the way Jesus chooses. This is the kingdom he proclaims. This is the king we are given. So today, we join the crowd, we wave our branches, and we shout, “Hosanna, save us!” But may we do so with open eyes as we ask for the courage to follow this king. Amen.