

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 29, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Isaiah 50:4-9; 2nd Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11, Matthew 27:11-37 Who is this?

Our Scripture reading today was rather long and it came in two sections because on Palm Sunday. We cannot discuss Jesus' triumphal entry into the city of David without talking about the tragedy that followed. We see the Son of David entering the city his followers hailed him as a king yet the only throne he finds is a cross.

Why did things turn out the way they did and who is this man? These are questions that we might want to think about as we enter this most holy of weeks. I know this region and this world are in turmoil because of forces beyond our control. It feels like things are so awry that we may never get back to normal. I don't know about you, but I personally want to witness Jesus' triumphal entry into the world. I think however, before I can witness that event, I need to figure out who this man was and what that means to me.

To get there, let us look at what is going on in scripture, then we can look at what is going on in our world today.

In the scripture we read that Jesus is riding through the city gates "on a donkey, on a colt" which is a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy (9:9-10). Certainly, if it appeared that he was riding on both a donkey and its colt it would have created a spectacle. Nevertheless, it was an unusual sight for the city to witness a 'pilgrim' or traveler riding on either a donkey or colt through the city gates since most common folk traveled on foot. Jesus, riding in this manner, had heads turning, not to mention the 'very large crowd' that spread their cloaks and shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David."

The very large crowd that Matthew speaks of was Jesus' own followers, his posse or entourage. They shouted proclaiming that here is the Son of David who comes in the name of the Lord, the Messiah – because that is what they knew him to be. These claims, however, as they were heard by the people in that city who believed their emperor, Caesar, was the one who ruled in the name of the Lord were startling. In fact, the citizens of the Roman Empire worshiped Caesar as a God. Not only that but proclaiming Jesus to be King posed a direct challenge to Roman authority and to Herod. It is important to note the meaning of the word Hosanna and its use to praise Jesus - Hosanna is a Greek word that derives from the

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pronunciation of the Hebrew word for “Save Now.” The people of the city would think that strange and provocative because they considered Caesar “The Savior” of the people. Matthew’s story has the followers of Jesus beseeching him to be their savior – I doubt the method Jesus’ would use to ‘save’ was what they had in mind.

During this chaos at the gates to the city, the people of the city became confused as to what was going on. Matthew uses a word that our NIV bible translates as stirred; however, the literal translation of the word refers to the action of an earthquake. This suggests that Matthew wanted to convey that Jerusalem was shaken to its foundation by the arrival of the Lord’s Anointed. So, the people wonder, who is this man that is causing all this commotion? Who is this person who rides in on the backs of animals? Who are these people who dare to make such claims?

The answer they received is that this man is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. It was not unusual for a King to also be considered a prophet, so when Jesus’ followers make this statement, they were correct, Jesus is the Messiah a “suffering servant” and many prophets in the Old Testament were referred to as “suffering servants.” I think however that it is more telling in this scripture that Jesus’ entourage refers to him as a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. Nazareth was an isolated small village of the poor, located in Galilee, a region of political and social unrest with racially and culturally mixed people. This was not the King that the city expected – maybe that is why just a few days later the city’s praise turned to condemnation, and they called for the death of this King.

That is what the second portion of scripture we read is about – the sham of a trial and the unjust sentencing of Jesus who dared to ride into the city as a King. This man Jesus, dared to offer the people an alternative to Caesar their oppressive ruler but they turned against him – they wanted a warrior. Not the one who was the Son of God the Father but one whose name means son of a father - Barabbas.

The treatment of Jesus at the hands of the Roman soldiers was appalling, and if we put our imaginations to work these verses can quite literally turn our stomachs. This was cruel punishment that today we would probably condemn and prohibit as cruel and unusual. This wasn’t waterboarding - this was real and vicious torture. Rome could

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merely have executed Jesus to get rid of him, they instead chose the most vicious death to make an example for anyone who might want to do as Jesus did. This was Rome showing their power by torturing and mocking those who would oppose them. Who is this man, Jesus and how dare he claim to be King of the Jews! This is what happens to those who challenge the oppressive ruling class. Fear and prejudice resulted in cruel torture and mockery.

Recall the words from Isaiah that we read this morning. From Isaiah 50: 7-9 *The Lord God helps me . . . I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? . . . It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?* Jesus here stands alone, who stands with him – not one of his entourage, those who were shouting Hosannas quickly turned to shouting “Crucify Him.” The Son of God, innocent and undeserving of all the torture and mockery his enemies could inflict on him, goes to the cross in absolute obedience to the divine will with neither protest nor self-justification.

There are more words from Isaiah that come to mind through these events.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:3-6

These are things we need to keep in mind as we try to figure out who Jesus is for us, and that is what we need to do during this time of reflection on the meaning of the cross. What does all this mean for us? Who was this Man of Sorrows?

Some say that the church must refrain from being too political. The first part of our story, The Liturgy of the Palms, makes it clear however that these stories and this season have political implications. Christ as King offers a different vision of God's will for the world from what any Caesar, ancient or contemporary, has ever offered. To follow Jesus means we advocate for justice and mercy to

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come to all people, not just those who are like us. Jesus makes clear that God, his loving Father, renounces the exploitation of the people by those who would be king, but he does so without violence. Jesus accepts the consequences of standing resolutely for God's order and justice. For those who would be great, this is the way of service to God's order. They too must participate in the sufferings of God in the secular life.

We saw in these scriptures a crowd and a city changing with the wind. On that Sunday centuries ago, those who proclaimed Jesus' presence moved from flinging down their coats to fleeing when the confusion of the onlookers turned to fear and anger. The crowd that traveled with Jesus was fickle, if they saw Jesus as a warrior who would save them, they rallied behind him. But when they witnessed the torture and mockery inflicted on him by the Roman power structure, they sided with the temple leaders. People in our world are like that too, we support the party, the leader of the party, and the party program if we perceive the possibility of personal gain. We only complain when things don't work out for our personal or economic benefit.

We face a time when, with plenty of justification, many look to the church of Jesus Christ with fear and anger. Faith history provides us with two options – leave the palms behind and join those cheering for the demise of the church or run away to hide. There is however a third option, we can turn toward those in the city, those confused onlookers and say with our words and deeds, "This parade is not about us but about the One we have come to know – this One who has changed our lives along the way – this Jesus of Nazareth."

That is the good news, there are other options for us rather than running away and hiding from power. Jesus holds us to a higher standard because we know what happens – we know what is on the other side of Jesus' crucifixion. Easter! The bleaker the world looks, the greater the temptation to give up hope that in God's time justice will be served and all will be made whole. In the face of all that is going on in our world today – the political fighting, the damaging weather, those who would deny reality, and a world in chaos. We can face the future with confidence, patiently waiting for Easter. Praise God for Easter when hope is renewed and confidence is restored. Holy week begins on Palm Sunday with triumph and shouts

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of Hosanna, in the middle of this week we will experience the tragedy of Jesus' suffering, but our confidence is that on Easter Sunday God defeats the powers that would destroy Jesus.

Who was this man – was he a prophet, was he a king? We can answer yes to both these questions but – that is not the end of the story. Jesus of Nazareth is one who will neither collaborate with nor passively accept the evil in his world. He calls us back to God's peace and justice; he practices what he preaches. He exposes the power of political authority and autocracy as something not glorious but brutal and ugly. He had the courage to face death and defeat it. To follow Jesus, to be Christ-like, means that we too must expose the powers that exploit our neighbors for what they really are. We must, as Jesus did, stand with the few against the many and speak out against the injustices in our world today. This waving of palms in worship today is indeed a political act, claiming the Church's allegiance to God's vision for the world and only to God.