



SUNDAY SERMON

Following Jesus into Life

Palm Sunday is a weird mash-up: we started by shouting hosanna to welcome Jesus into the city of Jerusalem for Passover, and we will end with cries of crucify him. How do we get from here to there?

It's confusing, to say the least, but I'll be honest with you: the Palm Sunday liturgy, the liturgy we are in the middle of right now, makes all of this more confusing than it needs to be, because we skip over some important details that happen in the middle of that Passover week. There's a reason the religious and secular authorities are so angry with Jesus by the time Good Friday comes: it's because he spends the whole week of passover publicly accusing them of wrongdoing.

So that's why I wanted to take a few minutes, in the middle of this liturgy, to fill in some of the story that's missing, before we hear the Passion narrative. Mark's timeline for the week of passover is surprisingly precise. Because of this, we can work out that Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before passover. If you read the text carefully, you can figure out what happened on each day of that passover week.

You will also begin to see that calling Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday a "triumphal entry" is sort of ironic: yes, the crowds shouted "Hosanna!"; but picture Jesus riding into town on his young colt, the little foal of a donkey. If you're not quite sure what that looks like, imagine a large and friendly dog, about three feet tall at the shoulder. Jesus has no armor but the cloaks of peasants, and he is lauded with palm branches and leaves instead of golden eagles on spears carried in procession by Roman soldiers.

You see, it was actually Rome that loved a "triumphal" procession. Rome excelled at using a military parade as a demonstration of its dominance, to keep its subjugated peasants in awe. And Jesus knew that Pilate, the Roman Governor, made a point of riding from his capital city on the coast every passover, to make sure these dirty crowds of peasants in Jerusalem stayed in line. Picture Pilate on a magnificent war horse and surrounded by a legion of Roman soldiers in red and gold armor, marching in lockstep as they enter the city gates.

Jesus' little street parade, in contrast, with the donkey and the palm fronds, is an anti-Imperial demonstration. He's mocking the empty pomp of the Empire, questioning the brutality with which Rome ruled the peasant class and kept Israel impoverished.

Jesus goes from tweaking one power to tweaking another: first the Empire, then the Temple. The day after that peace demonstration, Jesus takes over the Temple courtyard, the heart of the action during passover week, and stages a teach in. Remember Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers? Well, that's what he did on Monday of that week. He tells thinly veiled parables about

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DATE

Palm Sunday
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PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

the religious leaders which cast them in a very bad light. This goes on all week.

By the time Wednesday comes around, Jesus begins to denounce them openly: "Beware of the scribes," he says, "They like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces . . . ! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

They devour widows' houses: that is Jesus' accusation against the religious authorities. They take people who are already poor and make them even more destitute.

Jesus' whole ministry has been about speaking truth to power. The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus proclaiming, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" This is a dangerous message, because it challenges both Rome and the Temple. If God is King, then Caesar is not. And in Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom, God's love is not mediated by priests in the Temple, not for sale for the price of a sacrificial lamb, but instead is free and available to all. Is it any wonder that both the Jewish and the Roman leaders wanted Jesus dead?

Jesus came into the city on that Palm Sunday to have this confrontation. And he's calling us to follow him into the fight. To speak truth to power. To stand up for the values of God's Kingdom in our own day. Whose disciples are we going to be? Do we have the courage to follow Jesus?

I saw some of Jesus' followers on Pennsylvania Avenue yesterday. Like Jesus, they were marching right up to the seat of power, marching for their lives, marching for all of our lives. They were crying out that this country will no longer worship at the altar of death. That we will not bend the knee before an idol shaped like a weapon of mass destruction. They accuse the authorities of abdicating their duty and allowing the poor, the weak, and the young to die preventable deaths, all in service to their terrible idol.

There are consequences to telling the truth, we know that. That's the story we are about to hear.

Jesus tells the truth, and the world says no — but we have hope, friends, because God says yes. The world rejects Jesus' message and tries to silence him in death — but God vindicates Jesus and raises him to life. And God's love revealed in Jesus is life itself: Love that can never be silenced, never be killed. Love that will restore our lost humanity.

This is the same love motivating the young people from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, love born out of mourning their lost companions, love that death cannot silence. It is the love of God, that sustains the whole universe and continually pulls us from death into life. And life is the direction that Jesus is now headed. We know that getting there won't be easy. But still he calls us: Come and follow me.