



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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March 24, 2024  
Palm Sunday

A Scandalous Welcome  
Philippians 2:1-11; John 12:12-16

It must have been quite a scene that day as Jesus made his way down the road into the city. But then again, Jesus had become pretty good at stirring up a commotion wherever he went. Our own re-enactment of the scene with the pomp of "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," led by our children waving palms, and the singing of our "Hosannas!" is a rather tame version of what probably happened on that day.

The already bustling city of Jerusalem was teeming with pilgrims who were gathering on the first day of Passover Week. As word spread that the teacher, preacher, healer, prophet named Jesus was headed into the city with his band of disciples, large crowds ran out to greet him. But their's wasn't a dignified, ceremonial welcome. Instead, the throngs began to rush out, stripping branches from trees on the roadside to wave as they cheered him on. Mark's account says many also spread their cloaks across the road in a show of respect and admiration.

And as they came alongside him, they shouted "Hosanna," the Hebrew word from Psalm 118 that we heard in our Call to Worship. "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" they said, quoting the Psalm. But "Hosanna" is not simply a cry of praise or excitement, not like shouting, "Alleluia!" or "Amen!" "Hosanna" means, "Save us, we beg you. Save us!"

What we have come to call the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem was probably a chaotic scene, a sort of ticker-tape parade meets pep rally meets tent revival meeting. The Jews gathered in Jerusalem that day were a people increasingly oppressed under the thumb of Rome—taxed to the hilt, lacking freedom and dignity, growing impatient for the deliverance and restoration they believed God had promised, begging to be rescued. With all of this adulation and excitement then, we may wonder how things took such a dramatic turn for Jesus in just five short days, the days that led from a Triumphal Entry to a betrayal and crucifixion.

As dramatic as this scene painted by both John and Mark is, one of the keys to what happened to Jesus can be found in what the Gospel writers don't say, what they didn't need to say, because their first-century hearers would have known: that

on the other side of the city, likely on the very same day, Pontius Pilate was also riding into Jerusalem.

Entering through the west gate, the front gate, the Roman governor Pilate paraded into Jerusalem, entering the with legions of chariots, horses, and foot soldiers, dressed for battle and armed with swords and spears. We know from historical accounts that he was also there because it was the start of Passover week, but he did not come as a pilgrim to observe the festival. The sole purpose of his presence was to ensure that Rome's authority would not be questioned. What Rome feared perhaps more than anything was a popular uprising that would disturb the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, we read about in the history books. Rome was powerful, to be sure, but the vast territory and large population would make it nearly impossible to control if a group as large as the Jews decided to stage a revolt. So the empire would appease the people by allowing them to keep their provincial religions and customs but, during the Passover festival which celebrated the Hebrew people's liberation from an earlier empire, Pilate's arrival would remind them of Rome's power and provide reinforcements for the permanent Roman garrison in case there was trouble.

In stark contrast, on the opposite side of the city was a raucous, though by comparison, modest peasant procession coming from the east as Jesus rode a lowly donkey down from the Mount of Olives into the humble side of town, cheered on by his rag tag crowd of disciples and curious onlookers.

Pilate rode in on a gallant steed, a symbol of the conquering warrior. Jesus rode a donkey, a beast of burden and symbol of humility and servanthood. Pilate led a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers decked out in the empire's finery with royal banners waving. Jesus led a motley band of farmers and laborers who created a makeshift red carpet from their likely tattered work clothes as they waved the branches they gathered along the roadside. Pilate's presence was meant to invoke fear; Jesus' to inspire hope. Pilate's procession displayed the power of the empire. Jesus' proclaimed the kingdom of God. Two processions that in just a few days would collide and change the world forever.

So, how is it then that Jesus was received with such excitement and honor on Sunday, and by Friday was standing before Pilate facing charges of treason and blasphemy?

Certainly there were several factors that contributed. The scheming chief priests and scribes, who had long feared and been jealous of Jesus, working in partnership with Pilate, who is depicted as wanting to avoid responsibility and simply make the problem go away, formed an alliance between religious power and political power that is always an unholy and dangerous one—One of the reasons our

Baptist tradition has, from its beginnings, insisted that church and state remain separate and not have undue influence on each other.

We may also look to a change in public sentiment as the week went on. We often point out that the cheers Jesus received on this day as he entered the city would, by Friday, turn to jeers as the crowd would chant, "Crucify him!" when Pilate offered to pardon Jesus in place of Barabbas. Both men were revolutionaries and both seen by the authorities as a threat. But by this point, the people had grown so impatient under Roman rule that it was clear they preferred the violent political revolution of Barabbas to the nonviolent spiritual resistance of Jesus. Even considering the volatile atmosphere of Jerusalem during this period, however, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book *The Last Week*, which chronicles and explores the events of Holy Week as recounted through the Gospel of Mark, point out that the throngs of common folk who ran out to welcome Jesus on Palm Sunday were likely not the same people who would have been stirred up by the priests and then gathered into Pilate's palace courtyard on Good Friday—Pilate simply wouldn't have allowed it.<sup>1</sup> So, we really don't know if public sentiment had turned completely against Jesus or if, in the face of the alliance of the powers of Temple and Empire, the crowds that followed Jesus were too afraid to speak out in support of him.

What is clear is that Jesus was not simply a victim of circumstances who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In fact, Luke tells us that, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). The list of parallels we saw earlier have led scholars to conclude that the timing and method of Jesus' Triumphal Entry were quite intentional, allowing Jesus to draw direct contrasts between the abusive, power-hungry kingdoms of this world and the Reign of Peace and Justice he had come to proclaim.

In fact, it seems that it was the very purpose of revealing the Kingdom of God that motivated everything Jesus did and said, from the earliest days of his ministry until he said, "It is finished." Remember when Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue (Luke 4:14-30), his opportunity to establish what his ministry would be about, he picked up the scroll of Isaiah and read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he spoke with such eloquence that they were amazed by his teaching. That is, until he pointed out that this good news includes people outside the Hebrew covenant and how God could also use them to accomplish his work. His audacity to claim that outsiders like Gentiles could be welcomed into the fulfillment of the

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<sup>1</sup>Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 144.

kingdom he had just proclaimed was so scandalous that the hometown crowd tried to drive him off a cliff!

And this opening message became the theme and pattern for Jesus' entire ministry. Time after time, we read throughout all of the Gospel accounts, how Jesus stirred up suspicion and even plots against him because he dared to break bread with sinners and outcasts, to welcome those who were considered unclean or who must be sick or blind or lame or demon possessed because it was assumed they had angered God somehow. These repeated expressions of hospitality and grace were so scandalous not just because they defied norms and upset accepted social order, but, because from the point of view of the priests and teachers of the law who would conspire against Jesus, they were an abomination, a open denial of their interpretation of God's Law, a challenge to their authority, and a public embarrassment to them.

Even right up until two days before his last Passover, when Mark says that the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him, he is seen eating at the home of Simon the leper and allowing a woman he didn't know to anoint him with expensive perfume. This meal that once again symbolized the radical, inclusive, extravagant, welcoming grace of God was scandalous enough that it resulted in Judas Iscariot leaving the dinner party to find the chief priests in order to betray his teacher and Lord, and in his conspirators believing they now had enough evidence to arrest him.

As dramatic and riveting as the events of Palm Sunday and Holy Week are, even as we reenact them through our liturgy year after year, for those of us who have claimed the name of Christ and seek to follow him, what should be even more scandalous is if we are surprised by these events. You see, if we are living the life of discipleship to which Jesus calls us and are following his call, it means that we will welcome the stranger and eat with outcasts; we will break down social and political and even religious barriers in ways that will be life-changing and life-giving to those we welcome and revolutionary to the power structures that have a vested interest in fueling divisions and maintaining the norms that tell us to fear those who are different, to judge those who aren't like us, to exclude rather than to welcome.

But even as we prepare to step out to join Jesus on his journey into Jerusalem and through this Holy Week, let us take care to remember that, while we are the disciples who are called to welcome the stranger and extend hospitality to the vulnerable and the outcast, we don't look at them from a place of superiority or pity. In fact, if we are living as followers of Christ, we will recognize that there is no "us" and "them," but we will, as Paul wrote to the young church in Philippi, "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than [ourselves], looking not to [our] own interests but to the interests of others" (2:3-4).

And we will share the mind of Christ, who didn't act in ways to promote or protect himself, but "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (2:5-8).

Perhaps more than any other time, we are called to remember in this Holy Week, that in the presence of the Christ who died because the world rejected his message of love and mercy and welcome for all, we are the vulnerable and the outcast. We are the ones running out to Jesus shouting, "Hosanna! We beg you, O God, save us!" and the ones crying, "Crucify him!" We are strangers in need of God's scandalous welcome and sinners pleading for God's amazing grace.

Let us pray: O God who rescues us from the power of sin and death, teach us to welcome all people with the same scandalous hospitality with which you have received us. Remind us that we belong together and need one another because we are all your children. And in this Holy Week, give us the courage to walk with Jesus all the way to the cross so that, in dying with him, our hearts might be open and ready to rise with him to new life. Amen.

Merciful God, who bestowed on Christ the name above every name, we join our hearts and voices with those of old as we wave our palms and shout our Hosannas, and we bow before you to offer our praise. We are grateful for your abiding presence among us, for the example of mercy and sacrifice shown to us by our Lord, and for the suffering he endured for our sake. We are grateful for our own call to live lives of discipleship and obedience so that we might reflect your goodness to those we encounter. Each day of our lives, may we remember the sorrow Christ experienced in order to demonstrate your immeasurable love, and may we awaken to the new life you promise, created in your image, transformed by your grace, and sustained by your Spirit.

As we remember in the coming week the final days of Jesus' life, may we seek to learn and to live his example. Grant us peace as we face the tasks and the pressures of our days. In the midst of all that clamors for our attention, open our eyes that we might see you more clearly. Open our ears to discern your voice even as we are overwhelmed by the myriad of voices that would distort your message and distract our focus. Grant us the grace to guard against pride when the crowds shout approval and despair when their response turns critical. Amid the fanfare and fatigue of our lives, open our hearts to discover the persistent prodding of your Holy Spirit.

O God, as the cross looms on the horizon, support us with the strength of your compassion and mercy when the weight of our sin is too great to bear. May we be inspired by the example of the living Christ, who in living showed us a glimpse of your kingdom, and in dying and rising to new life offers to us your wondrous love. Amen.

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