

## LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

### *Protest of Palms*

Luke 19:28-40

April 13, 2025

This is why they wanted him silenced. If necessary, executed. It's not only the persistent message of love and forgiveness. Not only the embrace of outsiders, or those piercing parables of reversal and transformation. No, the crowds were growing too large, upsetting the delicate balance between political and religious forces, a threat to order. It was becoming clear that the movement surrounding Jesus of Nazareth needed to be snuffed out before it gained more momentum.

We began worship this morning with a procession, a parade of palms. Scholars suggest that there were two separate parades entering Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday, the beginning of the Passover week.

*One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial march. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered on by his followers. Jesus was from the peasant village of Galilee in Nazareth, his message was about the kingdom of God, and his followers had journeyed one hundred miles south. The story of Jesus has been pointing toward Jerusalem for many months, and it has now arrived. On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of the imperial cavalry and marching soldiers. One procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; the other, the power of empire. These two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>1</sup>*

**Palm Sunday is a protest.** It always has been. Two processions enter Jerusalem: one of empire, military might, and political power; the other of humility, sacrifice, and radical hope. Two different visions of the future. Two kinds of kingdoms. Then and now, the two collide. Across history, rulers have demanded absolute loyalty, silenced opposition, and crushed dissent. And in every era, brave

people of faith have lifted courageous voices in defiant hope, refusing to bow to oppressive power. On a Sunday morning in March of 1965, protesters marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. They were armed not with weapons but with a conviction that justice must prevail. That love must overcome hatred. And you know what they faced that bloody Sunday. Tear gas, batons, brutality. A show of force. Power, fearful of being challenged. And yet, they marched on. Twice more that month. They lifted their voices on the way to Birmingham, and their witness shook the foundations of injustice to their core. They testified to the truth.

For the faithful, the question persists in every generation. It is asked of us now.

#### **Which procession will we join?**

The gospel writer Luke records another Sunday morning march. A multitude of disciples lined the streets shouting their praise for the mighty deeds of power they had seen from Jesus. This is what we remember on Palm Sunday: the large crowd, the psalms of praise, the **power** of this palm-punctuated passionate parade.

Power—its source and purpose—has been central to Luke's story from the very beginning. You might remember the gospel opens with an angel's visit to a powerless young woman in a forgotten town. Mary receives a shocking promise: she will bear a son whose kingdom will never end. He will reign forever and ever. But in her song of praise, she makes it clear: her king will not seize human power; he will upend it. She sings, "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly."

When her son begins his ministry, he is led into the wilderness, where he is offered authority over the

kingdoms of the world. All he must do is forfeit his soul and bow low to the forces of evil. What is offered to Jesus is a shortcut to dominance, a temptation to rule by force. And he refuses. His power will not come from thrones or armies, but outstretched arms and open tables.

And now, he enters Jerusalem. The contrast is crystal clear. Jesus rides the colt of a donkey. The prophet Zechariah had seen it in a vision: "your king is coming, humble and lowly, riding on a donkey." It is a public act of defiance, an anti-imperial procession, a claim that God's power looks nothing like the tyranny of Rome, represented by Pontius Pilate. Recognizing Jesus' claim, the crowds tore the branches from the trees and the cloaks from their backs, threw them down and erupted in praise. In frenzied anticipation that their savior had finally come, they lifted their voices in that ancient, royal acclamation preserved in the psalms. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!" Their voices echo the multitude of angels who sang to lowly shepherds on a hillside to announce the birth of the Messiah. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" The lowly lifted up.

Well, the religious leaders, who have been watching Jesus closely since early in the gospel, now understand precisely what is happening. They see those cloaks spread on the road, hear the shouts of jubilation, feel the enthusiasm growing, and they sense the coming collision. This is no parade—it is an uprising.

And so, they respond. They demand that Jesus and his disciples cease and desist this dangerous display. Words every movement for justice has heard. *Don't make trouble. Fall in line. Order your disciples to stop!*

In those words, two understandings of power that have been aiming for each other since the gospel began finally meet. *Make your disciples stop!*

But they cannot stop. Not on the bridge in Selma or on the streets of Jerusalem. We cannot stop. Not now. We must not leave the praising to the stones, though they too would shout praise to God. We cannot stop when

the world still bows to power that crushes, silences, and oppresses. Not when the fear quiets the voices of truth. Not when the kingdom of God is still breaking in all around us. We cannot stop because the power of God is alive and on display this day, calling us to lift palms, raise voices, and join the march.

### **So, where do we stand? Which procession will we join?**

For the sake of faith's future, do not listen to the voices of fear that aim to silence your praise or your protest of perverse power. Not today, and not ever. Do not stop following Jesus, humble and riding on a donkey, your mighty king. Do not stop celebrating the presence of God in unlikely places. God's power is alive in you. So, with the crowds who waved palms two thousand years ago, let us tell the world about the power of God, and do not be silenced.

It will not be easy. This week, the road will be rough. We will walk through the streets of Jerusalem as the tide begins to turn against this peaceful prophet. We will stand and watch a trial filled with corruption, injustice, and abuse of authority. We will climb a hill called Golgotha where this march might have ended. Where the whole world thought it did.

But there is another power at work this week. There is a truth set down deeper than all that seeks to undo God's purpose. Look for a king who embodies power not by domination but sacrifice. Look for a king who does not wield warhorses, weapons, or wealth. Look for a king whose power leads not to the royal throne but to an old rugged cross. There you will see—only there will you see—the power of love in all its terrifying beauty and life-changing truth.

Even from the foot of the cross, some demand dramatic display. *If you are the Son of God, save yourself! Come down from the cross. It's what a real king would do. He could fix it. It's what we would do, given the chance.* Jesus recognizes the old demonic temptation. He will not save himself. His strength will be sacrifice. His power, compassion.

**What about us? Which procession will we follow?**

The forced march? Or the journey of love? Jesus is not the king we expect; He is the one we need.

So, will we bow down to power that destroys? Or will we lift our palms, raise our voices, and join the parade? You see, we are always making that choice. In every era we must decide which procession to follow. The world is watching, wondering if following Jesus sets us apart in any meaningful way. Our children are watching, wondering whether our faith makes any difference in the way we live. For their sake, let the world see the procession you have chosen—not just today with palms in hand, but tomorrow in the way you work, the way you serve, the way you speak. Let this powerful parade move beyond the pew and into the places we walk every day. This is how we follow the King who rides on a donkey.

**So, which will we choose? Which will *you* choose?**

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*, HarperOne Publishers, 2006, p. 2-3.