

Psalm 118:19-29 ~ Matthew 21:1-17  
*Seeking: Where Are You Headed?*<sup>i</sup>  
 Palm Sunday ~ April 2, 2023  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction*

Our second scripture lesson is found in the Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 21:1-17, which tells the story of when Jesus makes his entry into Jerusalem from the East on a spring day in the year of 30. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week in the Jewish year. Get ready to see and hear God's goodness in a spectacularly loud and disruptive way.

*Sermon*

What makes you shout? Some of us shout more than others. But sooner or later, I think we all do. Maybe watching a Packers game? Or watching the Brewers? (3-1 Over the Cubs, woo hoo!) Or watching our children and grandchildren compete on their teams. We may shout with extra excitement when our teams come through with the point they needed in overtime or the ninth inning. Or when we get angry at what seems like a bad call of a referee. Or if you are in the kitchen cooking up dinner and trying to get your couch potato family to turn off the game and come to the table (without their devices) --you may find your voice cranked up a few decibels. The closer we are to someone, the greater chance that special someone knows just how to push our buttons and make us so angry that we shout at them. "How could you?...Why do you?..... You always!.... You never!"

But wait a minute, I forget myself. We are Presbyterians and so we never *really* shout. We might raise our voice just a bit. Nor do we get *really* angry. Disappointed perhaps. Frustrated here and there. But we are decent, measured, faithful Presbyterians. Right? Well, yes and no. Don't you love those double answers? In the story I just read, there was a lot of shouting. And in the temple, definitely Jesus and the religious leaders got angry. For different reasons. Yes, Beloved Community, this loud, joyous, but also tense, confrontational, dust-up in Jerusalem is what we are celebrating and pondering today. What can we learn from Jesus' well-planned counter procession that took him right into the temple, the holy of holies, where his anger at what he saw became audible, visible, and disruptive?

***Hosanna! Save us! Save us now!*** What were they shouting about? Save us from what? Save us for what? It's hard to know what was going on in the minds of those in the crowd waving those palms, taking part in this impromptu spectacle. "*Hey JC, JC, won't you fight for me!*" Remember that spectacular song from the 1970 Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical "Jesus Christ Superstar"? The words of their song capture the feelings that were driving the crowd that day as they lay down their cloaks and waved those branches. They expected Jesus to be the warrior king on a stallion, poised to annihilate the armies of their Roman overlords. They believed that a strong leader must fight for the underdogs by force. Subdue force with greater force and violence. Isn't that the way it's done? But wait, why is he riding in on a donated donkey?

There were actually two parades going on simultaneously that day in Jerusalem. Jesus' unconventional and unexpected entry into the city from the east AND the extravagant parade of Pilate, the Roman governor, who entered from Jaffa Gate at the other side of the city. Pilate who came to Jerusalem to keep control of the extra crowds of Jews coming for the Passover, represented the Roman Empire. In the tradition of Roman generals, he entered with a grand procession, crowned with laurels, riding a chariot, pulled by white horses proceeding to the temple to offer sacrifices. Like the "Hosanna" crowd, those in the Pilate procession crowd would *also* sing hymns and shout acclamations to the traditional warrior king victor.

But on this day, as both leaders entered the city for Passover, they embodied completely different directions: not only literally but also theologically. Pilate commands military dominance and imperial power; Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God and the way of peace. Jesus' parody of that tradition is clear: he is riding a donkey, not a chariot. He will be crowned with thorns, not laurels, and when he goes to the temple he disrupts and drives out, literally turning over the tables, of engaged in the exploitive sacrificial system in the temple. Yes, our warrior-king for the humble, the hurting, the silenced, the misunderstood, the powerless, chose a borrowed donkey.

From Jesus' word "go" to two of his disciples in v. 2 to go and fetch the borrowed donkey, Jesus was staging a carefully orchestrated protest. What we call "Palm Sunday" celebrates a protest parade. We don't usually call it that here in church, because protests make many of us uncomfortable. If you think about it: protests *always* upset some people or groups of people. Whichever side of any particular protest one may be on: Protests are inherently disruptive. They are meant to be a collective shout to gain public attention. Holy Week, kicked off with Palm Sunday, is inherently disruptive. Jesus began his final week in Jerusalem with a protest parade, on a donkey, heading directly to the temple where he stopped business as usual. With his actions he was calling attention to the exploitation of the poor and voiceless. In their desire to be faithful and worship God, they were required to pay fees that robbed them of their meager income. ***Hosanna! Save us! Save us now!*** That is exactly what Jesus was doing that very day.

We know how this story goes. Jesus ends up on a cross, crucified, five days later. He wasn't crucified for being nice, performing miracles and healing people. Nor did he end up on a cross for being silent, or for making everyone feel comfortable. In our story today we encounter angry Jesus. Filled with righteous anger at the system that exploited the poor, even in the temple. The corruption of the temple system, perhaps got under Jesus' skin more than anything. Who knows. We *do* know he was angry and stopped business as usual that day. Shouts and "good trouble" that he knew would get him killed by the end of the week. Jesus did that, to save us. To "Hosanna" us.

Let's bring this closer. ***Hosanna! Save us! Save us now!*** As we imagine ourselves part of this crowd, I hear Jesus asking us today, "Where are you headed?" Which parade are you taking part in: with your words, your actions, your vote? Jesus knew that his calls for justice and peace, his saving vision, could only happen when common folk with uncommon courage oppose injustice together. If you think about the legacies of Harriet Tubman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther

King Jr, or Nelson Mandela, their work to free others depended on "the crowd." Yes, we need leaders to set the vision and to inspire. But we also need "the crowd" to make their vision, their goals actually happen. It is important for us to remember that the success of the Underground Railroad depended on people who provided safe passage for those seeking freedom from chattel slavery in the US in the nineteenth century. It was the Confessing Church in German in the 1930's that voiced their loyalty to Jesus and not to Hitler and the Nazis. It was the crowd of youth in South Africa, that formed the African National Congress Youth League in 1944. It was the crowd gathered by unknown organizers who made the the March on Washington, a march.<sup>ii</sup> The saving justice that occurred in each of these examples depended on leaders and a crowd of followers.

Iti was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said, "We will have to repent in this generation, not only for the evil words and deeds of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people." I hear Dr. King echoing the call of Jesus on Palm Sunday for us to shout out for God!! Shout out for good with all our might and muster. With our words, our prayers, and our actions. This week, I hear us being called to as we make our way to Easter by way of the Last Supper, the betrayal, and the cross: "What are we, what am I, silent about?" God is calling us to open our eyes and hearts and to look for the injustices around us that we don't see or choose to ignore.

It's too easy to look back at the struggles of earlier generations and ask how they could be so blind. We watched an excellent movie about the true story of Ruby Bridges with our confirmation class and mentors a few weeks back. In 1960, when she was only six years old, Ruby was chosen by the NAACP to attend an all-white school in New Orleans as a first step to bring the federally mandated integration of the public schools to that public school system. Protests went on every morning for an entire year, as she entered the William Frantz Elementary School building, escorted by federal marshals. It was a very difficult film to watch. It's easy for us to shake our heads and ask, "How could they be so blind?" And yet, are we, are you and I any better?

What injustices are we missing? Or choosing to ignore. Injustices that Jesus walked right down main street of Jerusalem and directly into the temple to protest. I have two for us to consider this morning. The first is exploitation of the poor and powerless by the rich and powerful, here in our nation. As Matthew Desmond has written, "Poverty persists in America because many of us benefit from it." I think he is right. His book titled, *Poverty, by America* is riveting and his argument refreshingly is non-partisan. Desmond traces the sources of poverty to three ways the poor are exploited: by the lack of affordable housing, unfair labor practices, and a financial system that preys on the poor, (and I don't mean the "pray" kind of pray).

He writes that most Americans, liberals, and conservatives alike, believe people, "are poor because they have faced more obstacles in life, not because of a moral failing. "Long overdue," he points out, "is a reckoning with the fact that many of us help to create and uphold those obstacles through the collective moral failing of enriching ourselves by impoverishing others. Poverty is not just a failure of public policy. It's a failure of public virtue. To break this cycle, we must commit to becoming poverty abolitionists."<sup>iii</sup> In this context on Palm Sunday, I will say it

like this: Poverty is a crowd problem and calls for a crowd solution. One that Jesus calls all of his disciples to solve. Particularly we who identify as a Matthew 25 church, committed to eradicating systemic poverty. Today, we can see the thread: Matthew 25 teaches what Matthew 21 shows us.

I promised you two. The second injustice (and our final one for today) is this. Good people: what are we shouting, what are we doing to save our children from death by firearms? I'm sure you've heard: Gun violence and other types of firearm deaths among children and teens have become the number one cause of death in the United States, surpassing motor vehicle deaths and those cause by other injuries. And this grim fact became true back in July of 2022, months before last Monday's grisly shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville, Tennessee. As of last Tuesday, we have already had 125 mass shootings in 2023, before the end of March.

Where are we headed? ***Hosanna! Save us! Save us now!*** Which protest we join is up to us. In this sermon series of questions, I will bring this sermon to a close with these questions: "Is it possible that our world still knows better how to deal with a bandit, a murderer, an insurrectionist than it knows what to do with the Prince of Peace? Is it possible that we would rather deal with raw power that rides on a stallion than with this one who comes on a donkey, with the weapons of love, patience, suffering, and peace? Given the choice, isn't it possible that we would take Barabbas, too?"<sup>iv</sup>

We have that choice again, today. We can choose to be silent or to shout (even if we are Presbyterians) in the name of Christ, our humble warrior for the underdog. Where are you headed? Will you follow Jesus all the way to the cross? What difference will this story make for you, for us tomorrow, or the next day?

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<sup>i</sup> The title and sermon themes for this series, *Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*. A series created for Lent-Easter Year A, are from A Sanctified Art, LLC.

<sup>ii</sup> Veronica Miles, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary -- Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew Desmond, "America is in a Disgraced Class of Its Own," *New York Times*, Opinion Guest Essay, March 16, 2023.

<sup>iv</sup> James A. Harnish, from *What Will You Do with King Jesus?* As quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, Norman Shawchuck & Rueben P. Job, (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2003) p.166.