SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

The King We Don't Want

Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday · March 29, 2026
Readings: Procession with Palms: Matthew 21:1–11 · Isaiah 50:4–9a · Psalm 31:9–16 · Philippians 2:5–11 · Matthew 26:14–27:66 or Matthew 27:11–54

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There are two triumphal entries into Jerusalem.

One is the one everyone expects.

A ruler comes into the city on a war horse—surrounded by soldiers, armored, powerful. This is how empires announce themselves. This is how peace is enforced: through strength, through dominance, through the quiet threat of violence.

The people in Jerusalem knew this story well. They had seen Rome.

And, if we're honest, we know this story too. It's still the way the world works. Nations rise and fall by power. Conflicts are resolved—or managed—through force, leverage, and control. It feels realistic. Responsible, even. It feels like the only way to survive.

And then there is the other entry.

Jesus comes riding a donkey.

Not just humble—deliberately out of step with everything we recognize as power. No army. No weapons. No spectacle. Just a borrowed animal and a crowd shouting "Hosanna."

At first, it looks like a celebration. But it's already a misunderstanding.

Because the crowd is still hoping for the first kind of king.

They want liberation, yes—but on familiar terms. Strength. Victory. Someone who will finally win.

But Jesus refuses that script.

And by the end of the week, that refusal will get him killed.

The movement from Palm Sunday to the Passion is not a sudden shift. It's a revelation.

The same crowd that shouts "Hosanna" can accept "Crucify him" because Jesus is not the kind of savior they can use.

He doesn't take control.

He doesn't defeat enemies.

He doesn't secure the future.

Instead, he gives himself over—to betrayal, to suffering, to death.

Which raises a hard question:

What kind of king is this?

From a distance, it can look like weakness. Or failure.

But the gospel is pressing us to see something deeper.

Jesus is not simply choosing humility over power.

He is **exposing** what we call power.

Because the systems we trust—whether ancient Rome or modern geopolitics—run on the same logic:

peace through superiority,

security through strength,

life through defeating the other.

And we believe in that logic. Not just out there—but in here.

We want control.

We want certainty.

We want to know that, in the end, we will be safe.

This is what Scripture would call the work of the ego—the part of us that cannot imagine life without being in charge.

So we project enemies. We cling to power. We even baptize our fears:

“God is on our side.”

“Our cause is righteous.”

“Our strength is justified.”

Palm Sunday disrupts all of that.

Because Jesus does not come to take over the system.

He comes to reveal it—and to stand outside it.

In the Lutheran tradition, we call this the theology of the cross.

God is not revealed in obvious strength, but in hiddenness, in suffering, in what looks like defeat.

Not because suffering is good—but because this is where our illusions are stripped away.

At the cross, every assumption we have about power is undone.

The soldiers mock him.

The leaders dismiss him.

The crowd turns away.

And Jesus does not respond with force.

He absorbs it.

Which means something astonishing:

God would rather be killed by the system than rule through it.

And that brings us uncomfortably close to home.

Because we don’t just live in a world shaped by domination—we participate in it.

In the ways we protect ourselves.

In the ways we judge others.

In the quiet belief that, if we just had enough control, things would finally be okay.

But Jesus offers no such control.

He rides into Jerusalem with nothing to secure the outcome.

No guarantees. No defenses.

Only trust.

So what is the good news here?

It is not that power doesn't matter.

It is that God has redefined it.

Power, in the kingdom of God, is not the ability to dominate.

It is the freedom to give oneself away.

It is the refusal to mirror violence.

It is love that does not depend on winning.

And on Palm Sunday, that kind of power looks like a man on a donkey, already on his way to the cross.

We are standing at the beginning of Holy Week.

We know where this story goes.

But today invites us to see it clearly:

Every empire rides in on war horses.

Every age believes that is just reality.

And every Palm Sunday, Jesus interrupts that story—

riding a donkey,

unarmed,

unafraid.

Not because he failed.

But because this is what God’s victory looks like.

Amen.

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