

Palm Sunday 2025  
Sermon 4.13.25

**Isaiah 50:4-9**

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

**Luke 19:28-40**

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’ So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’ (399)

Luke’s version of the story that gives us Palm Sunday doesn’t give us palms or even cut branches, doesn’t give us “hosannas,” neither children yelling it nor much of anyone, just the disciples. Sure, a whole multitude of them, and apparently making enough noise for the Pharisees among the crowd to ask them to keep it down, to get them to ask Jesus, “Teacher, order them to stop.”

We also get the colt, the young donkey. Four times mentioned, the fact of it and the getting of it taking up eight of the twelve verses: there is, as always, the colt, the donkey. Much has been made of this colt, beginning with the gospel writers themselves. The Gospel of Matthew even does what’s typical for that narrative: it notes that this was done to fulfill what the prophet promised. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion,” Zechariah had long prior promised, “Shout aloud, daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

But not only the manner was promised. More important, there was what this humble king would accomplish: “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

A humble king. One content to ride a simple beast of burden. Can you imagine?

If we were to believe the scriptural witness, a people lived or died by the character of their king. The Bible speaks of this a lot. From the time when the people Israel first insisted upon a king to the time when Jesus was proclaimed himself to be a king to the moment when he'd be nailed on the cross because of the crime of sedition, which is when someone claims to be a king while there is already a king (this thing of which there can only be one), the Bible is nearly obsessed with the question of kings, which is in its essence a political question.

And, of course, there was little that could be done if you happened to have a bad one, a bad king. There was no recourse for you, no way to intervene so you could get a better king or at least you could make better your king. For most of human history, in most of human groupings and tribes and nations and peoples, if you had the bad luck of being born at a time when a bad king reigned or you had the poor fortune of living in a place where a violent one held forth, then such was your life, vulnerable to the whims of someone who could exploit your labor, abscond with your offspring, steal of your produce or products, violate your sexual autonomy; and there was little to nothing you could do about it all, so little, indeed, that it would hardly even occur to you to try, unless you were a radical, a revolutionary. The king was like the weather: you enjoyed or suffered it without taking any of it personally.

Except for the insistence of the biblical witness. Except for this book of books, which will give you ideas. No, except for the insistence that Jesus is himself an altogether different sort of king, this man of God who will give even the most humble peasants and slaves certain ideas, one idea being that this is God's will that the people should enjoy the reign of altogether different sort of king, an altogether good and merciful, gentle and wise, yet also powerful-to-reign sort of king.

It happened again. Someone said to me again (though not someone in either of my congregations) that what we speak of in church isn't to be political, that Christianity isn't political, that it's a matter of personal piety, full stop. The salvation of souls, individual salvation: such should be our focus. Whether you have been saved or I have been saved, or whether you lied this week or I drove too fast this week, or we've any of us had resentful emotions or lustful ideas,

whether you took a penny but didn't leave a penny (you nearly never leave a penny!): such should be our focus here.

And it's not that it's *not* to be a matter of personal piety; it's not that it's not a matter of salvation—though I've push back against individual salvation. Salvation means wholeness: *salus*, wholeness. So how could such a thing arrive in individuated doses? But piety? No, we really *should* have honesty as our policy. We really *should* cast lust from our hearts and be true to our word and live up to our commitments. We really should leave pennies as often as we take pennies, for at least as long as we have pennies—for their on their way out, apparently, one decision of the Trump administration that I'm actually good with.

It's just that it's not *only* to be a matter of personal piety, which would be to limit the scope of what following Christ should mean in the world—because there is simply no aspect of our lives that should not be implicated in our aim to imitate Christ. There is no aspect of our lives that should not be claimed by Christ. Whether the secret lives we live in the privacy of our thoughts and the safe closet of our souls (rich lives these are, shared intimately with God; rich they are, and are to be!), or the relational lives we live with one another, in our marriages and partnerships and families and households and friendships, or the political lives we live when we gather with others for public action in our neighborhoods and parishes and towns and cities and the whole world to ratify ideas and ideals, and to allocate power and access to resources: these should all bear the marks of Christ's touch, Christ's hold on them and so transformed by Christ's persistence in our regard. “Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun,” goes the hymn we sing from time to time—and because it's true.

Surely, the insistence that Jesus is to be our king has political implications for what this so-called religion means to affect—and I say so-called because there's a good case to be made that following Christ was never meant to be a religion but was to be a sort of un-religion, an unbinding from the binding that is religious practice, the word religion itself saying something of binding. Consider: *ligio* is Latin for binding so “re-*ligio*” is something that binds again or binds back. But following Christ is as much an unbinding as it is a binding, as much a freeing (by grace) as it is a tethering (by law).

But I quibble with words. This religion as un-religion has political implications that are only denied by those who'd want to drain of its public potential, who'd want to quiet the restless soul when it comes to injustice in the political realm.

These were the people the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called to task in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Writing from the jail that held him because of the acts of civil disobedience he was performing and was calling on his parishioners also to perform, Rev. King addressed white northern clergymen who were eager to calm the body politic, counseling the status quo, and shaming the Rev. King for straying from his task of preaching piety and little else—as if the time for justice would come, a natural way of things, not something you had struggle for, not something you had to intend and suffer for, so preachers should return to their pulpits and speak only of personal sin.

What a convenient response from those with power to the dispossessed but uppity, folks who imagine justice might also be *their* birthright, beloved of God as they are, as all are, folks who are getting ideas.

No, of course, this following of Christ has political implications, and so this preaching Christ might do so with an eye on the political realm. For, Jesus as the model of kingship, the model of authority, authority whose source is always something of mystery yet that also plays out in the things blunt and plain of this world, means that we have a measure for evaluating those who would rule, a standard beyond the ruler himself (or herself, but let’s be honest...) who would otherwise be his (or her) own measure. We have a standard for measure, and it is Christ. We have a standard for measure, and it is the cross, the cross of self-giving love, the cross of self-sacrifice for the good of all.

Is the one in charge willing to take some pain for the good of others?

Is the king willing to suffer, really suffer, for the sake of those whom he would rule?

This question is a Christian question, and it’s one set upon us, if not nearly every Sunday, then certainly on Palm Sunday, when we see not only our king humble and riding on a donkey but also when this familiar scene is paired with Isaiah’s prophesying a suffering servant.

These so-called servant songs: there are four of them in Isaiah, dropped in with little explanation as to who is speaking and who’s being spoken of. A man of sorrows, yes: but who exactly? A man spat upon and insulted, a man who did not turn back though what lay ahead was humiliation and mocking, yes, but who and to what end? Jewish interpretation would often say this was, and is, the whole people Israel. Christian interpretation would say this is Christ, if not foretold in the prophecy than at least understood that the one to save wouldn’t be glorious in an earthly way, but would be humble; wouldn’t be sublime in shows of power but beautiful in displaying vulnerability and humility.

The gospel writers, of course, understood Jesus as this servant, the prophesied one from half a millennia earlier used to understand what Jesus was about, to lend intelligibility for who Jesus was and how he would serve and have effect. The gospel writers used the familiar to give understanding to the new, the altogether new. It was prophecy not as magical foretelling but prophecy as giving context and meaning for what of surprise was to come. Like when Elon Musk claims to be Caesar, which he did employing a Latin phrase printed cutely on a T-shirt he wore, he's not claiming (as far as I know) to be the reincarnation of Caesar but to be stepping into that tradition and role. The claim helps us understand him, understand how he understands himself. And when another tech CEO printed on her t-shirt in Latin "a world without Caesars," she wasn't pushing back against because he's literally Caesar but because he aims to be Caesare-esque, which is an offensive thing to aim for because Caesar wasn't a good guy, at least not when it comes to democracy.

The gospel writers understanding Jesus as the suffering servant didn't come as bad news to anyone but Jesus himself. And, when paired with the reading of Jesus' so-called triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he behaved sort of like a king but like that ancient foretold one, a humble one, a willing-to-suffer one, he turned inside out the whole concept of king, and presented the world a standard by which to measure the goodness of a king, or lack thereof. Is the king willing to ride a beast of burden on a rickety journey cheered on by unimpressive people whose end is the cross? Or would insist upon a war horse? A stallion, even? A cybertruck? Or a gilded golf cart at a private club?

Not everyone is going to live up to the standard Christ set. No, few indeed are the people who could live up to the standard Christ set. And yet this is the standard by which we the people are to measure, because of the witness of the church, because of the faithfulness of Jesus, and because of the will of God who desires our personal devotion and a purity of heart and the salvation of our souls, as well as our political wellbeing—that is, if the Bible is to be believed.

This, Jesus entering Jerusalem, is one of those stories you can find in all four gospel narratives. Thus, we hear it every year, and always on the last Sunday of Lent, on the first day of Holy Week. And since it tells of an event that took place the Sunday before the Passover festival and the night of Jesus' arrest, the Sunday before the crucifixion and death, it also puts us in real time with Jesus. We are a week before Easter, in story time and in liturgical time.

Liturgical time is a funny thing, the time we mark in the life of the church, in its liturgy. Liturgical time: it's mixed up. The order of events as told in the various gospel narratives nearly

never map on to how the church year remembers them. Like, the first Sunday of the new church year always begins toward the end of the story, either near the end of Jesus' life or the end of the age. Or like Christmas, which ten days later is followed by Jesus' baptism, when he was grown, and so more like thirty years later than where we ten days earlier. In the gospels, the synoptic ones anyway, what follows Jesus' baptism is his being driven out to the wilderness where he would be tempted by the devil. But in liturgical time that doesn't come until four to nine weeks later, until after the season of Epiphany is spent, on the first Sunday of Lent.

Liturgical time is mixed-up time—and yet there's a truth to it. When we enact something of scripture, we are closer to the original act than otherwise. Like, when we gather at the table to break the bread and share of the cup, we are closer to two thousand years ago when Jesus did the same with his friends than we are to yesterday (Saturday) or to tomorrow (Monday). There's an immediacy in the liturgical, a breaking into the chronology of things with some other quality of time, call it *kairos*, the in-breaking of the eternal now into the otherwise temporal march of things.

Which is all the more the case in this so-called Holy Week, when we walk in real time with Jesus. This Sunday is his Sunday of riding that donkey. This coming Thursday is his Thursday of gathering with friends to break bread and then later gathering himself in prayer only then to be arrested. This coming Friday is his Friday of hanging from the cross.

Story time slows down this week, a steady march to dread and redemption. Slow yourself down this week. Move liturgically through the otherwise wearying, or worrying or haggaring, way of time.

Walk with this peasant king this week. Walk the plodding pace of a donkey, a beast of burden whose burden is though light, that yours might be as well, that ours might be as well, a burden of light.

Thanks be to God.