

Matthew 21:1-11 and 27:11-31: What Kind of King?

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Palm and Passion Sunday, 29 March 2026

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Our first gospel lesson today is from Matthew, chapter 21. Listen with us for what the Spirit is saying to the church:

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

On this Palm Sunday, churches all over the world remember that crowd in Jerusalem welcoming Jesus into their city with honor. As the crowd outside the city sees Jesus coming, they all grab palm branches and meet Jesus, singing his praises. This is how you greet royalty, and they are right to celebrate him and shout "Hosanna!" In this moment the people around Jesus treat him as the gift from God that he is.

Jesus also uses this moment to make a statement. It's customary for kings and nobles to ride into such parades on horses, dressed in full battle armor. But Jesus comes in riding on a small donkey, an animal that symbolizes humility and peace and service. This deliberate act on Jesus' part shows the gathered crowd that this "King of the Jews" is *not* riding into Jerusalem to secure geopolitical power. He's not going to take up Israel's monarchy — at least not in any way the crowd imagines. Jesus comes instead to speak truth to power in both the Roman Empire and the Jewish religious establishment.

Presbyterian pastor Michael Gehrling reflected on this moment and wrote a poem called "What Kind of King?" Here's part of it:

What kind of king
rides on a donkey
a donkey that might be borrowed,
or might be hijacked?

What kind of king
rides on a donkey
into the city where
his assassins are waiting?

What kind of king
enters his assassins' city
with a ragtag commotion for all to see
and not one security guard?

What kind of king
lets his subjects treat him like a
military liberator but doesn't
come with a single sword or weapon?

What kind of king
can die
so that his assassins
can live?

A King who keeps his promises
A King whom I can trust
A King who can save
A King I want to follow

If only we could freeze that frame, that moment of honor and palm branches and prophetic hopes for peace. Because, despite what it may look like and feel like, we are not only celebrating a joyful parade of love and appreciation for our Savior who is coming to liberate us all forever and ever. Today also marks the beginning of Holy Week.

In just days we witness Jesus condemned by religious leaders, tortured, and murdered by the terrorizing power of the empire. So maybe it's helpful that the Christian church has a long tradition of also remembering Jesus' death on this Sunday before Easter. It's not only Palm Sunday, but we call it Palm and Passion Sunday. It's a day when joy and hope confront evil and death. And that second part is hard.

Pastor and writer Debbie Blue reminds us that

The story of the cross, the murder of Jesus, is a hard story to read. It's the climax of the gospel narrative. It's violent and graphic and sad, but it seems so strangely easy to glaze over, so hard to have any real feelings about. It might be because it's a moment in the text that we have handled so thoroughly by abstraction and proposition.¹

Abstraction and proposition. She means that we've turned Jesus' crucifixion into theological concepts, things we can hold out here away from us and look at and debate. Why would we do that? Well, I can admit some of my own reasons for not wanting to face Jesus' death directly.

First, torture is terrifying. So when I read the crucifixion story my own fears simmer. And if I shut down my feelings, push them away, I stop empathizing with Jesus, and his agony again becomes an abstract idea.

¹ Blue, Debbie. *From Stone to Living Word: Letting the Bible Live Again*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008. p. 173.

Second, I avoid looking at the crucifixion because the gospel accounts of it show unflinchingly how awful humans can be. And Jesus' suffering isn't unique. It places him shoulder to shoulder with the victims of all kinds of violence, all through human history. Looking directly at the cross confronts me with how deep humans can sink when we are fearful, power-hungry, self-centered, malicious — or even when we think we're doing the will of God. I wish this death story were not at the heart of our Christian faith.

So why does this humble, donkey-riding teacher so threaten the powers that be? He's born to working-class, not-yet-married parents, spends his adult days as a homeless traveling rabbi, and he and his people live in subjugation to the Roman Empire — an empire that preserves its power through radical violence, and through the ever-present threat of violence. And Jesus' words and his life subvert all that power-grabbing.

One of the earliest poems about Jesus is recorded in the letter to the Philippians, chapter 2. Biblical scholars call these verses "the Christ hymn." Here's what some of it sounds like:

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:
 Though he was in the form of God,
 he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
 But he emptied himself
 by taking the form of a slave
 and by becoming like human beings.
 When he found himself in the form of a human,
 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
 even death on a cross.²

On this Palm and Passion Sunday there's truth-telling that resonates with our lives and can't be ignored. We like the way Lutheran pastor Angela !Khabeb puts it:

Palm [and] Passion Sunday gives us a clear view of our duplicitous nature. ...[W]e are both saints and sinners. The more we see our reflections in the passion narrative, the more we see how we crucified Christ then and how we crucify him afresh today.
 When refugees are forgotten and discarded, Christ is crucified.
 When our neighbors are oppressed, ignored, or exploited, Christ is crucified.³

When transgender kids are denied life-saving medical care, Christ is crucified.

When children are shot in their classrooms, or blown up in their school, Christ is crucified.

When the most vulnerable in our communities are arrested and deported to countries where they know no one, Christ is crucified.

When God's good earth is manipulated for profit instead of protection, Christ is crucified.

When humans with power squelch the voices of those they exploit, Christ is crucified.

² Philippians 2:5-8, NRSV

³ !Khabeb, Angela T. "Palms, passion and paradox." *Living Lutheran*. 24 March 2018.
<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2018/03/palms-passion-paradox/>

While pursuing his ministry of love, Jesus is condemned to death by human evil. Even then, instead of calling on divine power to defend himself or to repay his tormentors, Jesus the Christ relinquishes all his privilege and in compassionate nonviolence goes to his death.

It's an incredibly hard story to take in. If you feel resistant to it, we are right there with you. And yet even in that bleakest part of the New Testament, there's a shard of hope. Because the radically nonviolent divine love that Jesus reveals does get noticed.

The centurion — the very soldier overseeing Jesus' torture and death — that centurion will say at the end, "Truly this man was God's Son."

Now listen with us to the beginning of that Passion story, the story of Jesus' suffering and death, from Matthew, chapter 27:

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus said, "You say so."

But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?" But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas."

Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"

Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him.

Then they led him away to crucify him.

In the name of God the Creator,
God the Crucified,
and God whose Spirit we Crave.

benediction

Go out into God's world in peace.

Celebrate Jesus as the gift from God that he is.

Honor the mystery that in Jesus' death, God stands shoulder to shoulder
with all victims of human evil.

And this Holy Week, pay attention for God's new word that will not give death the final say.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all, now and forever.

And all God's people say **Amen!**