

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Two Kingdoms*

Palm Sunday, Mark 11

March 24, 2024

Palm Sunday brings us face-to-face with Jesus. His entry into Jerusalem is symbolic of his encroachment into every geography of our lives we may have thought was immune from his message and into every citadel in our lives we may have thought was secure from the kingdom of God and its promises and its challenges. But here he is now, coming into the city, gone from preaching to meddling, and it is time to consider who this is who is coming and how you have responded to him.

Today's gospel reading begins the last week of the life of Jesus. The events of the week begin with his triumphal entry and end with his crucifixion. It occupies 40% of Mark's gospel. Some say Mark is a long passion narrative with a short introduction. And Mark is laser-focused on the events of the final week, giving a day-by-day report, morning and evening each day.

Mark is the earliest of the four gospels and a primary source for Matthew and Luke, who copied Mark word for word for many verses. As his long and detailed description of the final week of Jesus' life makes clear, Jesus is more than a misunderstood teacher or an idealistic revolutionary. His death was not incidental, accidental, or ancillary to his story. The ultimate meaning and message of Jesus resides precisely in his death and resurrection for all the world.

Jesus' whole life has been preparing for this week.

In his mother's lullaby, the upside-down, world-turning Magnificat, she sang of the birth of her son through whom God "would bring down rulers from their thrones, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty". The old man Simeon said of him, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against." There was never any sentimentality about this baby's future.

After living in quiet obscurity his entire adult life, Jesus burst onto the stage of history with an invitation and indictment, "Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand!" From that moment on he was on a collision course with the religious and political powers of his day. For three years Jesus made his way through the villages of Galilee, teaching in synagogues, preaching on hillsides, healing the sick, and inspiring followers, some of whom dropped everything in their lives to follow him wherever he went. He changed lives.

The word spread about him through the social webs of village life. The poor people came out of the shadows into the light that seemed to emanate from him: the diseased, epileptics, paralytics, prisoners, people mentally and spiritually afflicted, people in pain. The curious packed in just to get a look at him. So many people responded positively to Jesus. Others didn't: they responded with rejection, resistance, unbelief. Eventually, some of his closest followers left him. His family tried to bring him back home. His hometown tried to throw him off a cliff. All of it raises the question: how have you

responded to Jesus? By the end of three years, Jesus was a controversial figure and so much more, and he knew it. He said, “The Son of Man,” which was the title he preferred for himself, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask. It’s hard to blame them.

Those three eventful years and the growing sense of conflict culminated in the last week of his life when Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing full well that betrayal, persecution, and death awaited him. But he was not deterred nor daunted. His largest, most boisterous crowd greeted him at the darkest moment of his life. This was his ‘triumphal entry,’ Palm Sunday.

Jesus’ triumphal entry into the streets of Jerusalem was an ironic, symbolic one-act play, dramatizing his subversive mission and message. He didn’t ride a donkey because he was too tired to walk but as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy and as a planned political demonstration.

The Roman state always made a show of force during the Jewish Passover when pilgrims thronged Jerusalem to celebrate their liberation from Egypt. And so we can imagine two processions entering Jerusalem that morning. From the west, the Roman governor Pilate rode into town on a war horse with the pomp of state authority, flanked by brigades symbolizing the power and glory of Rome’s inevitable military might.

But remember when the two renowned gunslingers, Johnny Ringo and Doc Holliday met for the first time in the movie Tombstone? Remember that scene? The scene is tense. Then the bandit Ringo pulls out his six-shooter and shows off his fast draw and unequalled gun play, spinning and whipping his pistol around right in Doc Holiday’s face, challenging Holiday to respond in kind and up the ante until violence would be unleashed. When Ringo holsters, Doc Holliday just smirks. Instead of lifting a gun, he lifts a small, tin drinking cup, twirls it around in his fingers, mimicking Ringo’s gunplay but with what amounts to a child’s toy. He makes a farce of Ringo’s show of power, subverting the spectacle of violence and power. We can think of the triumphal entry of Jesus eliciting the same sly smirks of those who experienced it while Rome flexes on the other side of town.

Because on the other side of the city from Pilate’s pomp, Jesus descends from the Mount of Olives on a donkey, clip-clopping into Jerusalem in fulfillment of Zechariah’s ancient prophecy. Jesus’ entry was an anti-imperial and anti-triumphal “counter procession” of peasants that proclaimed an alternative and subversive community. (Dan McClendon).

Into the city that day come two ways of being in the world. Two accounts of ultimate authority, ultimate power, and ultimate lordship. Two stories’ narratives of the way the world works and the true story of the world. Two parades come into the city that day, each claiming their way of being in the world. Two kingdoms come, two wills being done. Two ways of narrating the way it is on earth and the way it must be in heaven. And they pose together a question: Which will you choose? How will you respond?

Jesus’ alternative vision of a holy reign and rule subverted major aspects of the way most societies, and certainly empires, have been organized and maintain their power.

Political oppression marginalizes ordinary people; economic exploitation positions the rich to always have an advantage over the poor. Religious legitimization insists that God wants it this way and wants you to stay put where we want you to be. All across time, empires do their business in the same way.

Maybe this is a sign of our times. Recently, the Washington Post relayed a story from a well-to-do, touristy enclave in Arizona where housing prices and cost of living has grown so exponentially that poor people who work there can no longer afford to live there. You can take a Jeep tour of the national forest, but the driver has nowhere to go at night. You can buy sashimi-grade salmon at Whole Foods, but the person who serves it to you is homeless. There's fear that the working class will simply abandon the area. Turns out, that rich people need poor people, too, sometimes. The city's proposed solution is to designate a large parking lot on the edge of town as an overnight car park, so people who have nowhere to live can sleep in their cars, so they can wake up in the morning and continue working their service jobs. This is what we've come to for the ordering of society's goods? This is Grapes of Wrath kind of stuff. The city's residents will vote on this proposal later this year, and opposition is already angry and organized. They shouldn't be allowed to be there, they're saying. Where then should they go, one may be forgiven for wondering?<sup>1</sup>

It's 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jerusalem kind of stuff, too. When the distance between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, comfortable and vulnerable grows beyond measure, it is soon measured in livelihoods and eventually lives. This is not the vision of the kingdom of God. Palm Sunday helps us remember if we ever dare forget. There were two processions representing two very different visions for how the world should go.

The Palm Sunday parade is more than a 1<sup>st</sup>-century street theater. It is a subversive counter-procession through the gates of the citadels of resistance to the revolutionary message of the gospel of love and peace and righteousness and justice. Jerusalem, he rides in. Jerusalem and Rome, Washington and Manhattan, Hollywood, Austin, Brownsville, Waco, he rides in, clip-clopping on in, not in a show of force but with a righteousness and expansiveness that makes all our other claims to truth or power or security or self-satisfaction or wealth seem awfully absurd.

What began on Palm Sunday as a festive procession ended on Good Friday with a public spectacle of violence from the religious-political alliance. Excited children waving palm branches disappear from view when violent mobs shout death threats.

During that last week, Jesus overturned tables in the temple, cursed a fig tree, and said something about the power of faith being strong enough to throw a mountain into the sea. Few were listening at the time. Disciples argued about who was greatest, Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, and all but a few women fled.

Christian life in the world takes as its model Jesus himself, who, even as he was riding into town that day, "being in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/03/19/sedona-homeless-sleep-car-housing-crisis/>

made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death — even death on a cross."

How shall we respond? Andrew of Crete, an 8<sup>th</sup>-century pastor preached on Palm Sunday: "It is ourselves that we must spread under Christ's feet, not coats or lifeless branches or shoots of trees, matter which wastes away and delights the eyes for only a few brief hours. But we have clothed ourselves with Christ's grace, with the whole Christ—for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ—so let us spread ourselves like coats under his feet."

Jesus rides into citadels of resistance which means he rides into our hearts. We are the site of confrontation between the world and the kingdom of God, the line runs right through each of us. Right to the heart. Just as the paths of Jesus and the path of Pilate would meet, as they must and will, as they come face-to-face, and even the face of empire would be forced to respond to the face of its true Lord.

Amen.

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