

Palm Sunday, Year A, April 9, 2017. Matthew 21:1-11.

If you're visiting with us this morning, we do this every week. Perhaps we should just start with what on earth is going on. Today we launch ourselves into Holy Week with a bewildering day called The Sunday of the Passion : Palm Sunday. It is traditional to begin the sermon on this day by complaining about how confusing the day is.

Liturgical whiplash is, I believe, the preferred phrase. And indeed, if you are planning a holy day and find that the name of the day has a subtitle, there's a good chance that you are planning something that people will experience as complicated. As you will have noticed, we begin the day by celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry as king into Roman-occupied Jerusalem. Jesus rides a donkey and a colt (as you do), people are cheering and throwing their clothes on the ground and shouting Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

It's great. And then we pivot, probably any minute now, to think also about the Passion. At the end of the service we will read St. Matthew's account of Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution by the government. This puts us deep into the events of Holy Week. So deep, in fact, that we will have to rewind on Thursday to get back to the Last Supper and the commandment to love each other as Jesus loves us. We'll spend late Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus and wake up on Good Friday, back in the same place that we end today. And just when things are starting to run sequentially, on Saturday night we back all the way up to Creation and go forward through the whole story of God's saving work for God's people, culminating in Easter.

In a way it's appropriate that today is a little bewildering, because it is the prelude to a week that Jesus' first friends must have experienced as bewildering. This week we, as a church, tell ourselves the chief stories of our faith, the story of who we are. It matters that *I* don't tell this story to you. There's a cast of dozens throughout the week and we tell the story to each other and to ourselves. The story of the whole week is really one thing, like a single symphony with several movements and I hope that many of us will be here to tell it and hear it with each other. And we start this story today by declaring, with palms and psalms and songs and stomping around that we are loyal to Jesus.

Despite two thousand years of Christianity and millions of Christians across the world, this isn't obvious. And it wasn't obvious on that first Palm Sunday, either. That's why we do it with such big symbols. That first Palm Sunday, as we read, Jesus enters Jerusalem with a ragtag parade of people who were also coming to the city to celebrate the Passover. Most of the folks in Jesus' procession were probably also pilgrims, coming to the capitol for a religious holiday that was at the same time their national independence day—Passover of course marks the deliverance of the people of Israel from enslavement in Egypt.

What the gospel doesn't tell us is that there would have been a funhouse mirror procession coming in another gate around the same time. Pilate was the Roman governor

and he didn't in fact live in Jerusalem full time. He was in town for Passover just like Jesus and all these pilgrims cheering for Jesus; only Pilate was there for the purpose of making sure that this nationalistic religious holiday doesn't give the people any ideas about a second deliverance from a foreign power. He would have come in force, with a significant detachment of soldiers, to make a bold and clear display of Roman military power.

This is what I mean by it not being obvious that our loyalty should go to Jesus. Jesus is coming into town with a bunch of hill folk, straddling a donkey and a colt or hopping back and forth between them or something. He's from the wrong town and associates with the wrong people. Pilate comes in on a warhorse, surrounded by the most powerful army the world had ever seen. He represents the most powerful person on earth. He offers safety and peace, in exchange for sacrificing some freedom and surrendering Israel's role as a light to the nations so as to be a tributary to Rome. He was a compelling option for the people's loyalty.

And he still is. The strength of the empire today offers us peace and prosperity, if only we will give up who we are called to be. If only we will put the empire first, we can have bombs and walls put to work in our defense. We can rest in the comfort that we are on the side of the people with the biggest weapons and the most power. And all we have to do is step out of the ragtag procession that comes into Jerusalem, disrupts the Temple business model, shares a holy meal that makes us one with God and each other, before finally going to the cross under the edict of the empire. All we have to do is be a people who do not need Easter because we don't think that anything is worth Good Friday.

The problem with this idea, of course, is that God chose that ragtag procession of out of town pilgrims. God chose the stories that we will tell ourselves this week: the holy meal among friends, the leader stooping to the deepest act of service in washing his followers' feet, the son who would rather die than kill, and then finally the empty tomb the faithful women the friends running to see what glory had happened. These are the stories we tell this week, against the stories of the empire that lead to walls and bombs. These are the stories of God's greatest work among us. These are the stories of who we are. Amen.