

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Palm Sunday
March 29, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Matthew 21:1-11

Theme: Bless the Lives We Actually Have: Blessed Are the Rejected

[prayer]

Here we are arriving at another Palm Sunday. The risk of Holy Week is that we stop paying attention to the details because the story is so familiar. *I've heard this before. I know how it ends.*

I am occasionally guilty of that thought. Which is why, when the Holy Spirit highlights a particular detail in Scripture, we do well to pay attention, no matter how absurd that detail may seem. I have read the story of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem more times than I can count, but this time I found myself fixating on verse 5, when Matthew quotes the Prophet Zechariah: "*Say to Daughter Zion, 'Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey's offspring.'*" (CEB; cf. Zech 9:9)

Zechariah prophesied that Israel's king would come to her mounted on a donkey. Have you ever seen a donkey up close? They are not especially majestic creatures. My parents' neighbor has several horses. She also has a donkey. The horses are elegant and dignified; they trot around their paddock with their heads held high. The donkey mostly keeps to itself and has a loveable but annoying habit of braying loudly at inconvenient times, like during Thanksgiving dinner.

In the ancient world, donkeys were beasts of burden, the poor man's mount, symbols of humility. Visit capital cities around the world today and you are likely to find a statue of a king or general on a majestic war horse. Not ever do you see a statue of a donkey. But Jesus rejects the conventional in favor of the eternal, rejects the kingdoms of men in favor of the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5).

Jesus is conspicuously meek in this story. He knows what he is doing. This is political protest at its best. There is good historical reason to imagine that on the other side of town, a different king is entering Jerusalem mounted on a literal war horse. The historical records tell us that Pontius Pilate, Caesar's representative, was known to descend upon Jerusalem at Passover in a show of military might to preemptively pacify any messianic uprisings among the Jews. *Look at my war horse and my terrible armies. This is what awaits you if you lift your voices against Rome.* Passover, which celebrates Israel's liberation from the oppression of Egypt, was a deliciously symbolic time of year to rebel against Roman rule. And that is exactly what some Jews were hoping for when Jesus entered Jerusalem – someone who would lead them in violently overthrowing Rome.

But here comes Jesus awkwardly astride the back of a poor, plodding donkey (or in the case of Matthew, *two* donkeys, which is even more awkward). This is the very opposite of majestic; instead, it is laughably, ridiculously humble. Jesus's toes are almost dragging on the ground. What is the meaning of this street theater? God's domain is not marked by pomp, ceremony, and the shock and awe of destructive power. It is marked instead by humility, peaceableness, mercy, generosity, and compassion.

The Jesus who enters Jerusalem is not just a spiritual challenge to the world's powers and principalities; he is a political challenge. *Who is your rightful king, Jerusalem? Who is your rightful king, Christians? What political and cultural loyalties will you lay aside to give Jesus the glory, laud, and honor he deserves?*

Scripture tells us that the whole city of Jerusalem was "stirred up" by the crowds swelling around Jesus (v. 10). It wasn't the first time; Matthew recalls that this same city was also disturbed at the news of Jesus's birth (2:3). In both cases, Jesus was hailed as king, but a king who represents an alternative vision of kingship. This was deeply unsettling for King Herod, who sought to kill the infant Jesus, and for Caesar, who brooked no challenges to his rule. Jerusalem would not recognize her rightful king for fear of destabilizing the status quo and upsetting Empire.

But this is precisely why Jesus came, why he died, and why he was raised. It was not to leave the world as it was. It was to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. The Common English Bible says the city was "stirred up," but a more literal translation is "trembling," "shaking," or "vibrating." The same word is used when

Jesus breathes his last breath on the cross. At that moment the temple curtain shielding the Holy of Holies was torn in two, symbolizing that no longer was there an artificial divide between the holy and the profane. Heaven met earth in the humble form of Jesus of Nazareth, dying on a cross. That word for shaking was also used to describe the earthquake that occurred at Jesus's resurrection. True humility will shake the powerful to their core.

In Matthew's gospel, the crowd's acclamation for Jesus juxtaposes the city's confusion and unease. The crowd represents us, Jesus's disciples. There were people in that crowd who were there purely out of curiosity. There were others who were already dedicated to Jesus's teaching. And there were still others who intentionally chose to cheer for Jesus instead of Caesar. Their *hosannas* were a protest chant of sort. They echoed the words of Psalm 118, one of the psalms sung at Passover: "Blessed in the name of the LORD is the one who comes [to the temple of worship]." Words of blessing, a royal acclamation.

But we know that this crowd cannot be trusted. Those shouts of praise just a few days later turn to jeers: "Crucify him!" And when Pilate turns to the chief priests and asks, "Shall I crucify your king?" they respond, "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15). They desired a conventional king, even if it was Caesar their oppressor; not a king whose power is shown through humble, sacrificial love. They rejected the kingdom of heaven for the kingdoms of men because they loved might, power, and control more than they loved God. Even Jesus's closest friends denied knowing him. They ran in fear and cowardice when God's glory ended up looking like the shame of the cross. Jesus was rejected by the very people he came to save.

We know this story. We know it, not just because it is read every Palm Sunday, but because this story is ours. It belongs to us. We are still rejecting the message of Jesus. We are still rejecting the Rejected One. If we believe that our hearts are not as fickle as that first Palm Sunday crowd, then we deceive ourselves. We want a war horse; Jesus offers us a donkey. And we reject that gift of humble loving service because over and over again we buy the lie that might makes right and violence buys peace. *Pax Romani* – the peace of Rome – was a peace enforced through violence and oppression. *Pax Americana* – the peace of America – is the same. Our government is currently prosecuting another war abroad in the name of securing us peace, or at least security. Meanwhile, because of this war, we have

neighbors who are forced to choose between buying food and buying gas so they can go to work. What kind of peace is that? Peace is not merely the absence of violence; it is also the presence of justice.

I am a realist; I know that in cases of self-defense violence is sometimes a necessary if lamentable response. But while violence may temporarily protect our peace, it does not preserve it for the long term. Violence always begets violence. Only the Way of Jesus leads to a lasting peace. Jesus died on a cross to redeem the sinful violence of men and call us to a better way. Jesus asks us to take up our crosses and follow him: To walk with him as he attends to the victims of our violent words and deeds and beliefs, to care for the people that society keeps locking out. Who are the people we reject because they make us uncomfortable or we do not understand their choices? Who are the people we are leaving behind? The way to peace begins by being curious about them and their stories and seeking to understand. God's kingdom lies with the people who are living on the margins, not with those at the heart of power.

Let us pray:

Oh God, you are interrupting us with
eternity once again.
Open our hearts and minds and eyes
and ears to hear what you have to teach us.

On this Palm Sunday,
time is marked as one small donkey
plods toward Jerusalem.
One with a face set like flint,
feet almost grazing the ground, walks forward
toward the eastering of all sorrow
—not in the power of horses and swift victory,
but in small, steady steps.
Toward the mystery
that through suffering, healing comes,
that through shame, dignity is restored,
that through the cross, powers are disarmed,
and death done away with forever.

Blessed are all those walking forward
into the great, small work they do:
in hospitals, homes, grocery stores,
classrooms, churches, and cubicles.
And blessed are we joining the crowds
waving palm branches
to shout ourselves hoarse:
“Hosanna! Save us! Save our world.”

God, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Spirit, have mercy.

Amen.¹

¹ Adapted for a communal setting from *The Lives We Actually Have*, page 202