

Palm Sunday sermon, Year A
March 29, 2026
Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

It feels like Holy Week began yesterday, just around the corner at Alameda Park, where thousands of people gathered for a “No Kings” rally and march. It’s a wonderful synchronicity that the No Kings rally happened on the same weekend as Palm Sunday and it is a good beginning to Holy Week. One could say that Palm Sunday was the original No Kings march! Yesterday, I saw signs that read: “We wave palms, they waive rights,” and “Blessed are the peacemakers, not the kingmakers,” and “no king but Jesus.” On that first Palm Sunday, if people had made protest signs, they would have read, “Hosanna!” which literally means, “Save us now.” Or “Save us, we pray.” Or “Help.”

The story of Palm Sunday celebrates what is called Jesus’ “triumphal entry,” into Jerusalem, which is an ironic title. Because across town, as Crossan and Borg suggest, another triumphal entry was taking place. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entered Jerusalem through the West Gate in a procession of wealth and military power with a war horse, a chariot, and 600 Roman soldiers proclaiming the power of empire. He and his officials were there to “keep the peace” among the crowds of Jews who were in Jerusalem for the Passover. They were there as a militarized force to deter unrest. And so Pilate and his procession really made a show of it. In the words of writer Kat Armas, “Rome’s need for validation was central to empire building. One of the highest honors in Roman politics was the triumphal procession ... that glorified Roman power. Conquests were reenacted for cheering crowds and issued stark reminders of the defeat that awaited those who defied Rome.”

And so Jesus, in an act of street theatre, enters Jerusalem on the other side of town in an *ironic* “triumphal entry.” Instead of coming in with military might on a war horse, he comes in on a donkey. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. His procession was a creative protest to what was happening across town. It was political. It was direct nonviolent action. And it is probably what ultimately got him executed. But it was done with nonviolence and humility. Pilate flaunted the wealth and power of the empire as well as the theology of the empire that was ruled by Caesar, who was called Lord and Savior of the world. Jesus makes a counter-protest by using symbolism from scripture, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, claiming the role of the true king proclaiming a reign of peace and justice, not violence – the peace and justice of the kingdom of God, not the “Pax Romana,” a fake peace that was maintained by control and violence.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was claiming the fulfillment of the prophecy from the prophet Zechariah, who, 500 years before Jesus’ birth, wrote to a people returning from exile who needed some encouragement. He offered hope of a future king that would rule with humility and peace. Here it is In Zechariah, which Matthew refers to in today’s Gospel reading:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, 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 there is more. Zechariah goes on to say:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations.

So when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, on the same day that Pilate is entering the city on a warhorse, the people immediately know what Jesus is doing. They know what to do and how to play their part in the unfolding drama. They grab palm branches, symbols of victory and royalty, and they wave them in the air. And they lay down their cloaks, which was an act of royal homage. “Hosanna! Save us!” They are welcoming the savior king who will save them, not from eternal damnation, but from the oppression of the Roman Empire.

We get confused, though, about what being saved means. And about what it means for Jesus to be “king.” About what God’s “reign” really is. We get confused. Jesus wasn’t trying to be a king, at least not in the way the world thinks of kingship. It was the people who wanted to make him one. We get confused. As Matthew writes, everyone in the city was asking, “Who is this?” “Who is this Jesus?” We are still asking this question today.

Just these past weeks there has been a lot of rhetoric coming from our government that confuses Jesus with military might. In governmental social media posts, we have seen a celebration of violence, as if war is a video game with images of military strikes being followed by clips from movies like *Top Gun* or *Gladiator*. A governmental official asked the American people to pray for victory in the battle in Iran and for the safety of [our] troops in the name of Jesus Christ. While we should definitely pray for our troops, this language that conflates wartime violence with the mission of Jesus and linking that to American success in war is a perfect example of Christian Nationalism and is antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is being put in Pilate’s parade of military might, instead of in the counter-parade that was ushering in Jesus’ peaceful nonviolent kingdom.

Back in the days of the Roman empire, there was a similar masking of the violence of war. As Kat Armas puts it, “This is part of the image that empire constructs about itself – [that] it is not an agent of violent conquest but a savior of the world, blurring the lines between aggressor and defender. Rome justified the horror it inflicted on millions by calling it self-defense.” As historian Diana Butler Bass told us when she was here last month, empire always tries to take over the story. Just like when Herod tried to take over the nativity story by claiming his own kingship over baby Jesus’. And just like we see in new efforts of the empire to take over the American story by white-washing the harm in our history and by re-writing our country’s relationship to its immigrants. And now, as we enter Holy Week, we will see and hear, through the stories we know well, the empire trying to take over the story. Even though it will look like empire has won, we know how the story ends. And it is how the story always ends, if we can be brave enough to believe that.

“Who is this?!” the crowds cry as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. Who is this Jesus? We get confused. What if part of the confusion is that empire doesn’t only exist out there? What if empire is also in here? Because we have been deeply and unconsciously formed by empire. It teaches us to measure our worth by productivity; to believe we are only as valuable as what we accomplish; to stay constantly busy, and achieving. It teaches us to pretend we are strong and certain, even when we are afraid or unsure. It teaches us to seek security through control and to make sure we are never the ones losing and to look down on those who are. It teaches us to hoard and to look down on those at the bottom. It teaches us that those in privilege should be at the center and have the seats at the table. It teaches us to be afraid and to remain silent. And so, we carry a sense of scarcity – that we don’t have enough and that we aren’t enough. We carry fear of vulnerability, because in the logic of empire, vulnerability is weakness.

The liturgies of Holy Week are a way we can resist, heal, and begin to “unlearn the rhythms of empire” within us, as Armas puts it: On Maundy Thursday, we will eat together and commemorate the first Eucharist when Jesus taught his followers a meal for the resistance. We will vulnerably remove our shoes and wash one another’s feet in an act of humble servanthood, freeing ourselves from the lie that worth comes from status or power. On Good Friday, we will bear witness to a savior losing to the empire. We will see how quickly we turn from praising Jesus to condemning him. And we’ll see him offer himself in an act of nonviolent love anyway. On Holy Saturday, we will grieve with Mary Magdalene and breathe through the pain of loss and failure and abandonment, and we will try to remember that love is stronger than death. On Saturday night we will listen to stories of God’s love for God’s people throughout the centuries, reminding ourselves of what our larger story has been and still is. We will baptize a baby, two teenagers, and an adult into the body of Christ, and then late that night and on Sunday morning, we will be surprised beyond our wildest imaginings. We will feel joy as we reclaim our story in the midst of empire and we will marvel at the mystery of it all. As you’ve heard Elizabeth and me say each year, we dare you to come to every single service. It is worth it.

During these days of militarism and might, injustice and inequity, we will counter with the stories and rituals of our faith that act as resistance to violence and scarcity and despair. We won’t let empire take over the story, because it can’t. In the eyes of the world, we might look foolish. We might look like we are losing. But, as poet Steve Garnaas Holmes puts it, “We are about to discover that this is not a story about victory, but of resurrection.”