

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Whose Street?

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Beloved siblings in Christ,

Every year we come to Palm Sunday with our palms and our pageantry. We know the choreography: the procession, the “Hosanna,” the green fronds that turn the sanctuary into something akin to a holy parade route.

But Matthew wants us to hear something sharper than pageantry. Because in the dust of first-century Jerusalem, “Hosanna” didn’t sound like a sweet church refrain. It sounded like a people pushing back. It sounded like the urgent language of the occupied.

Thus does Palm Sunday ask a question that is not only spiritual, but public: Whose street is it? Whose street belongs to God’s justice, and whose street has been claimed by fear, money, force, or empire?

“Hosanna” is not firstly a word of praise. It becomes praise, yes, but it starts as a plea. From the Hebrew *hoshi ‘a na*: Save, please. And save urgently. Save us, **now**. Not “save us eventually.” Not “save our souls in the sweet by-and-by.” Save us **now**.

Dr. Obery M. Hendricks Jr. puts it plainly in his book, *“The Politics of Jesus”*: “To cry ‘Hosanna’ was a prayer for deliverance from the Roman yoke... a plea for the intervention of God’s anointed to set the captive free.” That matters because Jerusalem is not neutral space in this story. It’s occupied space. And Roman power is not abstract in Jerusalem and Palestine; it’s enforced in bodies, in taxes, in land theft, in soldiers, in surveillance, in crucifixions. The streets are not just streets, they have become the arteries of empire.

So when the crowd starts shouting “Hosanna,” they are not merely welcoming a religious celebrity. They are doing what oppressed people have always done when

they can't breathe under the weight of a system, raising their voices in public outcry. "Hosanna" is a prayer, yes. But it is also a demand.

Which means Palm Sunday is not just about what we feel toward Jesus. It's also about what kind of world we are asking God to make, and what kind of world we are refusing to accept.

Then Jesus makes this all overt and unavoidable. He doesn't slip quietly into town. He stages an entry. Matthew tells us Jesus makes arrangements, though carefully. A donkey. A colt. A quote from the prophet: "Look, your king is coming to you... humble, and mounted on a donkey." This is not random. It is not merely transportation. It is a sign-act. A public claim.

And it is also, let's name it, parody. Because on the other side of town, empire also knows how to do a parade. Pilate's processional entry in Jerusalem would have been "shock and awe": cavalry, armor, banners, the golden eagle standard. Rome's way of saying, "We are in charge, and we will stay in charge." That parade says: Don't try anything. Jesus' parade says: God has already tried something and God is not finished.

Parody is Jesus riding in, not a warhorse, but a beast of burden. He does this not because he is weak, but because he is exposing the lie of imperial strength. He is announcing a different kind of power in the public square; power that does not need to terrify to be real.

Then the crowd joins the sign-act. They spread their cloaks on the road. In our world, a coat is something you might toss in the back seat. In their world, a cloak could be your only outer garment, your blanket at night, your protection from the cold, and for the poor who made up the majority of Palestine, your only collateral.

To place one's cloak in the dirt is not polite. It's costly. It's divestment. It's people saying, "We have been trained to give our bodies, our money, our loyalty to Caesar. But today we are putting our resources under the feet of another king." In other words, they are reclaiming the street. Not with stones. Not with swords. But with a public, embodied refusal to accept that Rome is the ultimate power.

Here's another question Palm Sunday forces on us: How do you keep walking when you know what's coming? Because Jesus is not naïve. He is not swept up in

the moment. He knows he is walking into a collision, a confrontation. That's where Isaiah 50 meets the road. "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." This servant is not just a protester; this servant is a sustainer. He speaks so the weary can stand back up.

But Isaiah continues: "I gave my back to those who struck me... I did not hide my face from insult and spitting... I have set my face like flint." That phrase, "face like flint," means the resistance begins even before the street and the parade. Before the confrontation. Before the cameras. Before the consequences.

A flint face is formed in prayer, it is truth-telling, it is the refusal to be defined by shame. Because shame is one of empire's favorite weapons. Empire doesn't only want your compliance; it wants your humiliation. It wants you to internalize your smallness. It wants you to believe you're lucky to survive. It wants you to mistake silence for peace. Isaiah says: the servant will not hide their face. Not because the servant enjoys suffering, but because the servant refuses the story that says suffering is deserved.

Womanist theologians have helped the church say this out loud: when bodies are targeted, when Black bodies, Brown bodies, women's bodies, queer bodies, disabled bodies are told "you don't belong," "you're unsafe," "you're disposable," the gospel is not merely an inner comfort. It is God's public "No" to the powers that feed on shame, and God's public "Yes" to the dignity of the weary, oppressed, and marginalized.

Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas frames Jesus' protest as a holy "stand your ground," not using the world's violence, but rather joining in God's refusal to move away from justice. So Palm Sunday becomes a picture of disciplined courage; Jesus sustains the weary with a word, and he sets his face like flint against the machinery that crushes the weary and shackles people in shame.

Then Matthew drops a single line that should make us sit up: "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up." The word Matthew uses, *eseisthē*, is earthquake language. This is not mild inspiration. This is disruption.

The city is not "moved" like a touching story. The city is shaken like a system under strain. Because real liberation has consequences in public. The earthquake has the elites asking, "Who is this?" Not because they're curious, but because their

control is being threatened. “Who is this, walking into our city like he owns the street?” And the crowd answers: “This is the prophet Jesus.”

But we should hear what’s underneath. They are saying: “This is the one who speaks for God against the powers.” And here is another hard truth of Palm Sunday, when God’s justice arrives, the status quo calls it trouble. When the hungry demand bread, the powerful call it “unrest.” When the oppressed demand safety, the powerful call it “disorder.” When the weary demand dignity, the powerful call it “divisive.”

But Matthew says that this is what it looks like when God’s kingdom gets near. The city shakes. Many BIPOC communities know this “stirring” in their bones, the tension that rises when the quiet of injustice is interrupted by the noise of truth. And as James Cone, author of “The Cross and the Lynching Tree,” taught the church, the gospel is never neutral. It takes sides; with the crucified, with the occupied, with the weary, with the shamed.

Now, it’s important to see that the Palm Sunday parade in the street is not an isolated stunt. It’s the culmination of a long strategy. For chapters and chapters in Matthew, Jesus has been teaching people how to live free inside an unfree system; how to resist without becoming what they resist.

Consider just a few of his “everyday resistance” teachings:

The second mile (Matthew 5:41). Jesus names a specific imperial practice: soldiers could compel civilians to carry their pack for one mile. It is legalized domination. Jesus doesn’t say, “Just endure it.” And he doesn’t say, “Attack him.” He teaches a tactic that unmask the system: go the second mile. Not as submission, but as disruption.

You force the soldier into a moment of accountability. You take initiative. You make the oppressor confront the limits of his own power. You expose the absurdity of the law by exceeding it. When you walk that second mile, you aren't being 'nice.' You are also putting the soldier in legal jeopardy. You are forcing the oppressor to wonder if *he* is the one who is actually in trouble.

The naked truth (Matthew 5:40). If someone sues you for your tunic, give your cloak as well. In a shame-based culture, nakedness turns the spotlight, not on the

poor person's inadequacy, but on the system's violence. "Look at what you have done. Look at what you have taken." This is protest that uses truth as a mirror.

The disruptive prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). Jesus teaches his followers to center the will and kingdom of God as opposed the pursuit of wealth or power. And rather than focusing solely on spiritual salvation, Jesus elevated the physical, everyday needs of the people (like food, shelter, and security) to a matter of divine importance. Ensuring that the vulnerable have their basic needs met is treated not as a secular issue, but as a sacred obligation.

So by the time we reach Palm Sunday, the crowd has receipts. They are not cheering for a generic "spiritual leader." They are cheering for the one who has been teaching them how to stand tall without a sword. How to retain dignity under occupation. How to reclaim the public square with creative nonviolence.

Then shortly after the parade we see the leaders attempt to trap Jesus in conflict with the empire. The coin and the image (Matthew 22:15-22). "Whose head is this? Whose image?" The denarius carries Caesar's image and Caesar's blasphemous claims ("Son of God"). Jesus says, give Caesar back his coin. But the deeper message is that Caesar does not own your *eikon*, your image. Caesar does not own the *imago dei*, the image of God, stamped on you. Your body, your conscience, your worship, your loyalty, those belong to God and God alone.

All of this illustrates that Palm Sunday means Jesus is not only welcomed into our hearts. He is also welcomed (or resisted) in our public life. Palm Sunday asks: Who gets to be safe in public? Who gets to walk home without fear? Who gets healthcare, housing, bread, and peace? Whose pain is ignored to preserve someone else's comfort? Whose voices are called "too loud" because the truth is finally being heard?

Palm Sunday also asks the church specifically: Are we a crowd that waves palms like props, or a people who practice divestment; who put something of real value on the road? Laying down your cloak also meant standing vulnerable in the wind. It asks the church: Are we willing to be uncomfortable (physically, socially, or financially) to pave the way for a justice that doesn't benefit us personally? Because the cloaks in the dirt are a question to us; what would it look like to place our resources under the reign of Christ instead of the reign of fear?

Not just our donations, though that matters. But also our time. Our attention. Our courage. Our willingness to be “stirring” people in a world that worships “calm” and “civil” and “comfortable.”

Palm Sunday is not the end of the story. The same crowd in the street that shouts “Hosanna” lives in a city where empire retaliates. The parade street will lead to a cross. But Isaiah tells us what holds Jesus steady, a word for the weary and a face like flint.

So here is the invitation today: Receive Jesus’ word that sustains you, because many of us are weary. And ask God for the flint face, not hard-heartedness, but holy steadiness. The kind of steadiness that refuses shame. The kind that can walk into the public square without surrendering to fear. The kind that can love boldly without becoming violent. The kind that can tell the truth and still belong to mercy.

Because this is the strange power of our king: He does not take the street by force. He takes it by truth. He takes it by humility. He takes it by courage. He takes it by a love that exposes empire for what it is; and still refuses to hate the people trapped inside it.

So today we lift our palms, yes. But more than that, we lift our lives. And we say, not as pageantry, but as prayer and protest and promise: Hosanna. Save us, now. And then we follow Jesus into the streets where God’s justice is not private, and God’s salvation is not theoretical, and the weary are not forgotten. In the name of the One who comes to reclaim the public square: Jesus Christ, our humble King. Amen.