

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
April 13, 2025  
Palm Sunday  
Luke 19:28-40  
Luke 22:39-62

*Lord Jesus Christ, as we enter this sacred week, we remember the path You walked—the cheers of Palm Sunday, the intimacy of the Last Supper, the agony of Gethsemane, the sorrow of the cross, and the silence of the tomb. In this time of reflection, open our hearts to the depth of Your love and the cost of our redemption. Help us to walk with You through each. Amen.*

### **“The Message of Jesus: The Last Words”**

I can vividly remember the Palm Sunday services I attended as a child. They were full of all the pomp and majesty that befits a good Presbyterian Palm Sunday service. The aisle was the perfect length for a grand procession, and at Westminster Presbyterian it was quite grand. The choir would lead the procession, followed by the ministers, and then the Sunday school children. All in all there were probably 100 people processing down the aisle, all of them waving their palm branches high in the air, singing a boisterous rendition of “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.” I loved it, and I’ve been trying to recreate it ever since.

The late Peter Gomes calls this the “Let’s have a parade” theory of Palm Sunday, and I am here for it.

But I’m not sure it’s all that faithful, you know what I mean? Sure, there’s joy and hope in the air as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem. There’s even a hint of the Christmas story: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” the crowds cry, echoing the angels’ song at the birth. But there’s also a dissonance in the air; the cloaks the people spread on the parade route, a detail unique to Luke, are a symbol used to welcome a king; but Jesus rides a donkey, not a warhorse. So already there’s this juxtaposition of triumph and impending tragedy. Jesus is doing something new and different, but new and different are a hard sell; always were, always will be.

You see, Palm Sunday and the events that unfold in Holy Week are all about transforming society and working towards something new and different, and that requires hard work and some suffering; it can create a lot of pain, too. And we don't like pain, do we? So we shun pain for the familiar, even if the familiar isn't good for us. And yet, God keeps calling us toward something deeper. Something more honest and life-giving. But that kind of transformation can be unsettling. It stirs things up in us — our comfort, our assumptions, even our faith. And when that happens, it's only human to hesitate, to retreat, to resist.

Friends, it bears pointing out that nothing about Jesus changed between Sunday and Friday; but the crowds sure did, because the reality of what he was trying to do finally hit home for them. If this week teaches us anything, it's that God is able to change everything about us — our fear, our sin, our guilt, our untruthfulness. But to receive that change in our lives we have to have a revolution in our hearts, and the very thought of that frightens us to our core. So we yell crucify. We flip from praise to punishment even when we know we shouldn't; even when we know it's not right.

And why is that, you think?

I think it's good old-fashioned fear.

Fear of what we might lose.

Fear of what we might have to change.

Fear of what others will think.

Fear of what God might ask of us if we really, truly follow this Jesus — the one who rides in not to rule, but to transform.

Because transformation is hard.

Rebecca Chopp, a feminist theologian and seminary president, once said that transformation requires imagination — and imagination, she says, most often lives on the margins. Jesus lived on the margins, and his ministry was to and with the people who also lived on the margins. Because it's the people on the margins who can see what the center cannot. They're not beholden to power, so they're not afraid to question it. The status quo does not protect them so they dream beyond it.

And those kinds of dreams can be threatening. They can upend the world as we know it.

No wonder the crowd turns mean.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately — how quickly we can go from joy to judgment, or love to loathing, because we're not getting any better at resisting our instinct to yell "crucify." If anything, we're getting worse.

David Brooks wrote a powerful article titled *How America Got Mean*, and in it he explores this very shift — not just in individuals, but in our entire culture. He says, "We are a society that's terrible at moral formation." Now to be clear, Brooks doesn't think we're born mean. He says we've lost the structures that used to teach us how to be good — churches, schools, civic institutions; those things that taught us how to be kind, responsible, community-minded — they've all frayed and been pushed to the margins, Brooks argues. As a result, we've become more isolated, more transactional, and more tribal. And in place of those civic institutions we've built echo chambers and battlegrounds.

And it shows . . . in how we talk to each other online, or how quick we are to judge and demonize. It shows in the endless "gotcha" culture, and in bullying disguised as honesty. If we don't like what someone says, we cancel them. Our algorithms reward the loudest, most cutting voices, not the most compassionate. We cultivate outrage.

Oh, sure, we still know how to yell "Hosanna"; but we've become quicker to yell crucify. Quicker to judge, quicker to exclude, and quicker to shout down instead of reach out. Is it any wonder that when someone like Jesus dares to ride in not with weapons or power, but with love and vulnerability the crowd turns mean?

Meanness is everywhere, and as Christians this should cause us alarm. Meanness, and its corollaries, fear and anger, cause us to find scapegoats; they cause us to say awful things about people, and they cause people to demand that those with whom we have differences be crucified.

But Jesus pushes back on this meanness up until the bitter end. Throughout the entire passion story, Jesus confronts everyone. He pushes the disciples to pray. He pushes God to relent. He pushes the disciples to resist sleep. He pushes Judas to face the depth of his betrayal. He pushes the disciples and all gathered to stop the

violence. He pushes the priests and guards to face their lack of integrity. And he pushes and confronts us with a mirror that does not lie.

Jesus pushes us to journey down a road we'd rather not go; a road that makes us face the deep truth that hatred and fear and meanness have no place in the gospel. None. Ever. And a road that makes us face those times we have yelled crucify.

Which is to say the times and places we have seen people treated unfairly and looked the other way, or the times and places we've treated people unfairly; the times and places we have turned a blind eye to injustice or been a party to injustice; the times and places when we have compromised our principles in order to preserve our personal rights and the status quo, just like the crowd, Herod and Pilate did so long ago.

But on Palm Sunday, Jesus didn't fight fear with fear, or hate with hate. Instead, he spoke up, stood up, and showed up. He came in peace, He wept, He loved, He forgave. He refused to put up with a culture that says, "Meanness is power."

And so here we are — standing with Jesus at the gates of the city. And we know what's coming. We know that once we step through, we're caught up in a story we can't control. One that takes us to the cross and asks more of us than we think we can give. That's why so many of us hesitate. That's why we stay at the edge.

But Jesus doesn't turn back, nor does He send us away. He walks through the gates, and he asks us to walk with him — not just to the shouts of Hosanna, but through the heartbreak of Holy Week. And in doing so, he reminds us that these gates are not just the entrance to a city that crucifies love. They're also the doorway to resurrection.

Because this is what Holy Week is all about — the bold, aching truth that God can change everything about us: our fear, our guilt, our sin, our untruthfulness. But for that change to take root, something inside us has to give. Something has to die — our pride, our defensiveness, our meanness, our resistance to grace. And that kind of dying is never easy.

But on the other side is life. On the other side is joy. On the other side is love that will not let us go.

What wondrous love is this, o my soul? What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss To bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul, To bear the heavy cross for my soul.

The gates are open. The road is hard. But Jesus is already walking. So the question is: will we go with him?

Amen.

Sources: Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, for his thoughts about standing at the city gates "Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 2", commentary for Luke 19:28-40 and Luke 22:39-62 "Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship", Year C, Volume 2