

Palm Sunday A 2026 Matthew 21:1-11

On Tuesday I attended the annual renewal of vows service for clergy, which this year was at Trinity in Altoona, the church where I grew up. Being back in that building that is so familiar to me—but is enough of a maze to others that I needed to help a few people find their way around—made me think of how we take our traditions for granted. Be it a religious, cultural, or family tradition, what we think of as *normal*, because we've always done it, may make no sense to someone encountering it for the first time. *So, your kids disguise themselves and walk around the neighborhood at night asking strangers for candy... You cut down a live evergreen tree, stand it up in your living room, hang irreplaceable family heirlooms on it, and then spend a month yelling at your cat to stay away from it... In the coldest, snowiest month of the year—not on the first of the month, but on the second—you send a bunch of guys in top hats to pull a groundhog out of its hole, and you look at its shadow to predict the weather... And then there's Lent, where you draw on your face with dirt, eat fish on Fridays, and cut branches from palm trees—in central Pennsylvania—to wave like you're part of the crowd at Jesus' triumphal entry... as if you don't remember what the crowd did to Jesus next?* I'm not saying there's anything wrong with our traditions, even the ones with strange explanations; but we should be able to explain them. Why do we observe Palm Sunday? What were they really doing that first Palm Sunday?

Details vary slightly, but all the gospels agree that Jesus and his disciples went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Passover is the festival commemorating God's saving act through the final plague on Egypt that convinced Pharaoh to let the Hebrew slaves go free. We could say it was like their Independence Day, although after wandering the desert for 40 years and colonizing the Promised Land, God's people still experienced a long history of war, occupation, and exile; and of course, Israel in Jesus' day was not free but was occupied by the Roman Empire. Pilate and his attendant military presence in Jerusalem make more sense when we remember that the crowds were gathering to celebrate their historic freedom while they were struggling under government oppression.

So much of what Jesus says and does in his life could be studied as a contrast to the message and methods of Rome. Rome establishes a kingdom by violence; Jesus establishes his kingdom by humble service. Rome promises to vanquish enemies; Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Rome announces peace across the empire, but in truth it's less peace than forced compliance maintained by an occupying army—soldiers who could press civilians into carrying their gear up to a mile, prompting Jesus to instruct his followers to go a second mile also—an act of peaceful protest. Rome established their supposed peace through terror: the cross was a form of public execution meant to frighten onlookers into submission as much as to punish the guilty—or innocent—who might inspire resistance. When the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples in their locked room to say “Peace be with you” he was trying to encourage them in the midst of very real terror at very real danger.

It helps to contrast this scene in Matthew's gospel with what would have been happening on the other side of Jerusalem: Pilate on his war horse with legions of soldiers would have been entering the city en route to the governor's palace in a military parade meant to exhibit the glorious might of the Roman Empire. In contrast, Matthew leans heavily on Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah to portray Jesus: humble—not grand and noble, mounted on a donkey—not a war horse, his path covered by tree branches and people's cloaks—not the red carpet used to welcome ancient royalty. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem mocks the ostentatious display of Roman power. It's possible that some of the Judeans were still impressed by Pilate's parade, that they still believed the propaganda in spite of what they saw happening all around them, happening *to* them, that they still hoped someday they would finally benefit from what Rome promised; but I tend to imagine cold resentment and stony silence as the people of Jerusalem watched a brutal army take over their sacred city. On the Mount of Olives however, the crowds shout their welcome to Jesus: *Hosanna to the Son of David!* "Son of David" was a royal title, and "Hosanna" means *Save us* or *Deliver us*. The people had picked their champion, and it wasn't Rome, and it threw the whole city into turmoil.

On this Palm Sunday, when we reenact the crowd's acclamation, we echo their claim that Jesus is the one who delivers us: God's way, and no other way, is the way to salvation. The kingdom of God, not human empire, is where we place our trust and our devotion. We take a stand against violence and cruelty, against exploitation and excess, against the notion that might makes right or that the ends justify the means...so long as we come out on the winning side. It's never winning when it comes at the cost of others' dignity and suffering.

But here's the hard truth; it took that crowd less than a week to give up on the way of the Lord, to buy into what the Empire was selling, to stop shouting *Hosanna to the Son of David!* and to start shouting *Crucify him! We have no king but Caesar!* And if we're going see ourselves as members of the Hosanna crowd today, we have to own up to the ways in which we also act like members of the merciless mob on Good Friday—abandoning the ways of Christ for the ways the world promises will help us, enrich us, save us. You may not come back on Thursday to hear Jesus set one last example by washing his disciples' feet, and you may not come back on Friday to sing *Twas I Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee, I crucified thee*...but nevertheless, that is what we do. We wave palm branches today to join the protest against the powers of this world that defy God, never forgetting how easily and how quickly we can be tempted away from the life of humble loving service to which God has called us through baptism into Christ. As we begin this holiest of weeks, let us give thanks to the only one who deserves our *hosannas*, who became our salvation and deliverance—not by conceding to human ideals, strategies, practices, or powers—but by uncompromising faithful obedience to the just and loving way of God.