

Luke 19:28-40

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025

The Wilderness of Politics

When my therapist asked, “What’s the phrase you remember your father saying most?” I didn’t even have to think. “Be still,” I said.

Silence was sacred to my dad — at least when it came to everyone else, especially in the car. The radio stayed off. Conversation was minimal. And when he’d had enough of children being children, he’d declare it was time for the Quiet Game.

I always lost.

Whenever those in power say, “Be quiet,” or try to silence voices — whether in a family system or in a nation — it’s time to pay attention.

Palm Sunday shows us this dynamic in full view. As the crowd celebrates, the powerful grow uneasy. The Pharisees tell Jesus to quiet his followers. And Jesus replies, “If they were silent, the stones would cry out.”

One commentator put it this way: “The story goes from Hail Him to Nail Him.” How does that happen? It starts when power feels threatened by truth, and tries to shut it down.

The words of Anne Lamott come to mind: “Expectations are resentments under construction.”

Expectations were high — too high. And unmet expectations turn into resentment. From “Hail Him” to “Nail Him” in a matter of days.

Hail Him

On that Sunday, two crowds shout Hosanna. The first group — the poor, the oppressed, the unseen — had been lifted by Jesus’ presence. This was someone enacting the prophetic vision of the prophets before him, who intentionally identified himself with those that Empire thinks are a nuisance to their blood-thirsty commitment to acquisition and control, enforced with violence. He had proclaimed: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to bring good news to the poor ... to let the oppressed go free.”

They saw Jesus for who he really was: a prophet, a liberator, a peacemaker. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey — a ridiculous peace donkey — through the East Gate where the poor lived, while Pilate entered from the West on a warhorse. Two processions. Two kingdoms. Two ways of being in the world.

Historians say Jesus was staging a counter-procession. A parody of empire. A declaration that God's reign looks nothing like Caesar's.

So he enters, and the people shout: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

The Pharisees are alarmed. "Tell them to stop," they demand. Jesus says, "If they were silent, the stones would shout." What I am up to in this world cannot be contained by silencing the voices of those who dream of a better world. The deadest thing you can think of, a rock, would animate and shout out.

The Spirit won't be silenced. The cry for justice, for healing, for a better world — it will always find a voice.

These followers got it. They weren't the ones who would turn away later. They were the ones who stayed. They were the ones who didn't shout for crucifixion. They were there through the pain, through the heartbreak, through the cross.

Nail Him

But there was another group in the crowd. Those with different expectations.

They remembered the Maccabean revolt, when palm branches symbolized military victory. They waved them again, hoping Jesus would lead a rebellion against Rome. Like Joshua. Like David. Like Judah Maccabeus, nicknamed "The Hammer," who stamped an image of palm branches into their coins which symbolized victory for the Jews over their oppressors.

But Jesus wasn't that kind of king. He weeps as he approaches the city: "If only you had recognized the things that make for peace ..."

Jesus knew he was misunderstood. He had said he would suffer and die, but they couldn't accept it. Their hopes were too tied to violence and victory. And so he wept, not just out of sadness, but because he knew what was coming. Forty years later, the rebellion against Rome would end in Jerusalem's destruction. Unheeded warnings. Tragic consequences.

They missed the way of peace.

Jesus warned us in the Sermon on the Mount: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you ... for the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life."

Have you connected "the narrow gate" to the "golden rule?" Turns out the narrow gate is not a sinner's prayer; the narrow gate is the practice of the Jesus way. Who knew?! The narrow gate is fulfilling the law and the prophets by empathetic love of neighbor in imitation of Jesus.

The God Who Keeps Going

Even though expectations were unraveling, Jesus didn't turn back. He rode straight into the storm.

Jesus didn't come to meet our expectations. He came to reveal God's nature — not as wrathful, but as co-suffering love. Not as punisher, but as healer. Not to conquer enemies but to redeem them.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes: "Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix."

Jesus confronted the principalities and powers — not just Rome, but religious authorities, economic injustice, and spiritual blindness. His miracles were signs of another world breaking in. The politics of heaven.

And on the cross, Jesus doesn't beg for vengeance. He offers forgiveness: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

That is God's judgment: mercy. That is the power of the cross — to reveal a love that will not quit, even when nailed down.

This Is Who God Came to Save

Everyone in this story projects their own desires onto Jesus. We do the same.

We expect God to protect, to provide, to deliver our version of success. And when that doesn't happen, we build resentment. We think God let us down. But maybe we misunderstood what God was actually doing.

Jesus didn't come to meet our projections. He came to shatter them.

He came to save the real us. The confused. The angry. The hopeful. The ones who wave branches one day and walk away the next.

As Nadia Bolz-Weber writes: "We, as we are and not as some improved version of ourselves ... we are who God came to save."

So go ahead. Don't wait until your motives are pure. Just come. Wave your branches, even if you're not sure why. Sit at the table. Be washed. Be fed. Be seen.

Jesus is not here to change God's mind about you. He's here to change your mind about God.

The cross isn't God demanding a sacrifice to forgive. It is God becoming the sacrifice to forgive. It is not divine wrath being satisfied, it is divine love being revealed.

Pilate tried to mock him with that sign: "King of the Jews." But it wasn't mockery. It was truth.

The cross is the coronation of the world's true King. The Humble King. Who rides a donkey on his way to die for his enemies. The Kind Leader. Who enters our cities to serve us, not to dominate us. The Carpenter from Nazareth. Who builds a table of inclusion for all.

So it's time to get off our high horses. And follow him.

Someone might say, "You're always talking about how God loves us, but what about judgment?"

From his cross, Jesus judges the world. And the judgment is ... forgiveness.

Because while the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross is not about you, it is most certainly for you.

Nothing — not your doubts, not your failures, not even death itself — can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Hosanna in the highest. Welcome to Holy Week.

Amen.