

# Palm Sunday 2022

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

- [ 0 : 0 0 ] All right, all right, all right. Welcome to this place. I'm so excited to be with you on this Palm Sunday. Today we're moving into the final lap of a sermon series that we've been doing since February.
- We've been calling the series Let My People Go, and we've been grounding ourselves in the book of Exodus, the story of God's salvation, God's deliverance of the people, of the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery.
- We've been using that story to try to talk just a little bit about deliverance overall, liberation overall, salvation overall, to ask what is the nature of God's saving work.
- We've been trying to name the ways in which the work of God is both deeply spiritual and profoundly concrete, both about soul craft and about the conditions on the ground in our homes and in our neighborhoods.
- And now as we come to the end of this Lent, we've made a turn from the book of Exodus. You might have noticed that last week. Trying to think about how it was that the first century Jews and Christians came to think about that liberating work of the Exodus in their own stories and in the work of Jesus.
- [ 1 : 3 6 ] Last week, Anthony specifically pushed back against the common understanding in Western Christianity that our salvation, that this deliverance and liberation is just about forgiveness of personal sins.
- Just personal sins. While that's there, he expanded that out and helped us think about how the first readers of these stories would have thought about forgiveness of sins.
- Well, this week, I want to add to that. I want to do a sort of pushing back of my own against the notion that holy week, that what grounds our liberation is bound up with God's wrath.
- I think that there's something that is so much more beautiful to consider than a wrathful God. And I think that the perfect passage, it's actually one of my favorite passages, to unveil this reality, is the traditional Palm Sunday passage.
- Mark's account is what we're going to look at this morning of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey. But before I go there, I do just want to say a few things about this week.
- [ 2 : 5 4 ] Maybe the most important thing to know about this upcoming week, called Holy Week, is that it's often considered the most sacred time of the Christian year.
- It's what grounds the Christian liturgical calendar. This is kind of like, Easter is kind of like the new year of the Christian liturgical calendar. This is a week in which we observe and reenact what happens from this Sunday, this moment of Jesus entering Jerusalem, all the way until Jesus goes to the cross.
- And a little bit of a spoiler, is raised. That's all I'll say about that. That's all I'll say about that. Okay. More about that next Sunday.
- Okay. Oh, gosh. So the conflict with the Jerusalem elites is a major frame for the stories that you get in all of the gospels.

So the moment that Jesus actually sets foot in Jerusalem is critically important. It's the moment the action of the confrontation reaches its crescendo.

[ 4 : 00 ] And I want to also say that in Mark's gospel, the way of Jesus is always the way that leads to Jerusalem, to this confrontation, and ultimately to the cross.

This week, Christians all over the world are reenacting this. They're thinking about Thursday and Friday in particular, which often people consider to form the contemplative center of Holy Week.

Thursday is when we turn our attention to the final meal, the meal that we celebrate every Sunday here at the table, where Jesus sits with his disciples for the final time and communes with them.

And then on late Thursday night and into Friday morning, we think about Jesus' betrayal in the garden and the arrest of Jesus. And then Friday, we try to do this thing that to me is always difficult, always a little awkward, but we try to look directly into the face of this thing that happens, the murder, the torture, the lynching of Jesus on the cross, an imperial cross, a cross that is made possible by religious collaboration.

Then Saturday, Saturday, we sit with those first century Christians, those first century disciples of Jesus, and we try to remember what it must be like to feel utter despair when all hope is lost.

[ 5 : 35 ] We try to sit with crucified persons and crucified people in the world who will never, ever know resurrection on this side of death.

We remember that experience and we lean into it. If you want to reflect and try to inhabit the events of Holy Week, this is the teacher in me.

I'm sorry. I just got to say this. A couple of things you can do this week that are really helpful. You can start at Mark 11, which is where we'll start today, and you can just read through the end.

Well, I could stop after the burial of Jesus, but you could read through. You can do the same thing with Matthew, with Luke, and with John, and just sit in those stories and try to inhabit them and remember what these things signify.

Try not to skip ahead. That's always my temptation. I need to know, okay, but something good. Try not to skip ahead. Stay with the events and what they say about ourselves and about our world and about the God that we follow.

[ 6 : 43 ] And know that Christians that are poor, that are persecuted, that are powerful, that have tons of privilege are all looking at these same texts.

It's an amazing moment to consider the unity of the entire church. If we can slow down and try to take ourselves to Jerusalem. And then this week is a week to ask ourselves about what this story is all about, what our following Jesus is all about, what our worshiping Jesus is all about.

Holy week is sometimes called Passion week, and today is sometimes called Passion Sunday. And if you think about that word, it has a Greek root that goes back to the idea of suffering.

Jesus is suffering. And then, Jesus is suffering is what we think about to some extent. But also consider just the regular way we use the word passion. And let that help you to think through and help lead you to ask the question of, what was Jesus' passion about?

What was Jesus passionate about? And thus, what should we be passionate about? So I grew up believing that Jesus was primarily passionate about satisfying the wrath of an angry God that was caused by my personal sin.

[ 8 : 18 ] You know, things like when you tell your wife that the dress looks good and you're not sure it does look good, right? But you say that. Honey, that wasn't you. Okay, that's not you.

That was not you. Okay. But that's what I thought it was. I thought it was personal sins. Some of the earliest Sunday school lessons that I ever heard, and some of you might be familiar with these, they were those felt board lessons.

The lessons when you're a little kid and they break out the squares that are made of felt. They start with this black square. And the black square is personal.

It's your personal sin. It's about your, like, the ugliness that God cannot stand. And then the next square is the red square that's about the blood of Jesus and Jesus kind of standing in front of the blackness of your sin.

And then the next square is a white square. We can talk about the black and white part later because, yes, okay, a lot there. There's a lot there. But then you get the white square, which is about now you're washed.

[ 9 : 25 ] You're pure. Your personal sin is taken away. God's wrath has been appeased. And then you get this green square, which represents this kind of new inverted life that you now have access to.

But what's most important, really, what grounds it is all that black square. That's the beginning of it. It's the wrath of God. And I actually heard this week that as people were kind of trying to wrap this up, maybe Anthony said this last week.

I don't know. But I think it's so interesting, this idea that people knew you couldn't start with wrath, like advertisers and people like that. So they had to put something more positive before it. So often the story doesn't start with wrath in some of the tracks you read.

But I grew up believing this story. This was primarily all about forgiveness of personal sin. There wasn't anything particularly cosmic or larger or about our everyday kind of world that we walk around in with all of its problems.

That's not what it was really about. What Jesus did on the cross was a legal transaction. It was about a penalty that was paid by a substitute.

[ 10 : 36 ] That substitute was Jesus. Salvation, deliverance, and liberation were all deeply, deeply imagined in courtroom imagery. You believed, you stepped across the line.

You were declared innocent. And that was the most important thing you could do. And what was also really convenient about all this is that it could be summarized in just a few sentences.

Something I dearly miss. You could just summarize it super easily and say what, kind of the fullness of what you believed. All right, it's probably clear I do not believe that anymore.

I think that this is a much larger story that we're in. And I do stand here with trepidation because one, y'all, it's Palm Sunday. You don't want to mess it up, right?

As a preacher, y'all have all been to the Christmas sermon where like the pastor used some like reference that you're like, what's happening? Just give me Mary and Joseph. You know, like just, so I know that makes me nervous, but I'm also nervous because I can't anymore give you the one thing it's all about.

[ 11 : 46 ] I'll give you several things later in this sermon that it's about, but I recognize in some ways thinking about God in bigger ways makes things more complex, makes things more mysterious.

And I think that's something that's also beautiful. A bigger gospel, an alternative way made possible through the body of Jesus.

So this morning we're going to explore this text, Mark 11, 1 through 11, as an entry point to thinking about the alternative way. And I will say what helped me this week in thinking about this, I mean, what really hit me this week when thinking about this sermon and this week that we're going into was sitting at the dinner table one night and often as we were finishing eating I'll turn on the evening news.

And if any of you were up on the news this week you know there were horrible images in the news of war crimes committed by Russians against Ukrainians.

the Russian military, I should say that. And I remember this moment of urgently having to tell my son, Dimitri, like, no, no, no, turn away, turn away, turn away from these images.

[ 13 : 06 ] You can't see these images. You can't see these bodies lying. You can't see the violence that we, that we inflict on one another.

And it reminded me of another moment where I had to do essentially the same thing. And that was two years ago after the murder of George Floyd when my son was playing in front of our TV.

He was two. And I literally had to run over and pick him up and grab him because of the images that were playing across the screen over and over of his torture and then death.

And I know that if I were to ask you about violence, senseless violence, you would be able to name massacres.

You would be able to name things that are happening in this very city that lead to death. I'm guessing that you could name more than I could even think of, from random violence against children in classrooms to genocide.

[ 14 : 12 ] genocide. And there's so much that doesn't even make the headlines. One of the hardest things for me to think about is the way in which things like childhood poverty or violence is violence.

Or the prison industrial complex is violence. We seem to believe this story that says that our security, our peace, our best hope for an ordered society necessarily rests on violence and suffering.

So, often, this time of year, preachers, they start to talk about Adam and Eve and original sin and the fall in connection to the death of Jesus. And one of the things I often wonder is why we don't talk more about the killing of Abel by Cain and the violence that is present there and how that connects.

to the death of Jesus. We don't, perhaps, because at the end of the day, we believe, and I don't mean you in this room, of course, but we, society, believe that violence is redemptive, that violence can be a source of goodness.

When it's all said and done, we too often live in ways that say that the suffering of some people is justified for the freedom and comfort of other people.

[ 15 : 37 ] and in a society that's deeply influenced by Western Christianity, my hunch is that the way that we have thought about the last week of Jesus' life has deeply legitimized and helped maintain the violent world that we have created.

yet. Yet, there is something unfolding in Holy Week that is bigger than that, that is alternative to that, and it starts as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

So let's look at this text this morning. It is Mark 11, 1 through 11, and I'm gonna grab my water bottle, y'all. That's a little small.

If you can't see it, go ahead and pull it up on your phone or open your Bible, whatever you have. Mark 11, 1 through 11. When they were approaching Jerusalem at Bethphagia and Bethany near the Mount of Olives, he, Jesus, sent two of his disciples and said to them, Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a coat that has never been written.

Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, Why are you doing this? Just say this. The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.

[ 17 : 24 ] They went away and found the coat tied near a door outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, What are you doing untying the coat?

They told them what Jesus had said and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the coat to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it.

Many people spread their cloaks on the road and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David. Hosanna! In the highest heaven.

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple and when he had looked around at everything as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

[ 18 : 25 ] So first, I should say what is absolutely fascinating to me about this passage is the way it is often described by scholars.

One scholar calls it choreographed street theater. I love that. Another calls it a strategic act of revolutionary symbolism which breaks open subversive hope.

still another describes it as parody and another as literally prophetic vision. The words choreographed and strategic make clear that this is intentional and what's fascinating about this passage if you read it a few times is you realize over half of the passage is just about Jesus telling them what to do with the donkey.

There's a lot of donkey stuff in this thing in this passage. I never noticed that because the preachers always jump ahead to Hosanna but no you've got to focus on what happens with this donkey.

So what Jesus does is deeply deliberate. Jesus and his disciples come into the city. There's a ton of symbolism here. They come into the city by way of the Mount of Olives and this is the place where God was supposed to appear in the future.

[ 19 : 50 ] They come and they're celebrating the Jewish Passover which is fundamentally about the liberation of the people from Hebrew slavery and of course about a general liberation that God affects.

They come and Jesus chooses a donkey and he's riding on this donkey and it's clearly echoing for the first people who read this and think about this.

Zechariah 9, 9 through 10. Rejoice greatly O daughter Zion. Shout aloud O daughter Jerusalem. Lo your king comes to you triumphant and victorious is he humble and riding on a donkey on the colt the foal of a donkey.

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.

His dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. And then he chooses a donkey that's never been ridden and only this idea of animals that haven't been ridden is there because these animals were reserved for kings.

[ 21 : 13 ] I love that he doesn't even buy a donkey so much of his message in the gospels is to peasants people who would never have been able to afford to buy a donkey so he borrows a donkey there's not even a saddle on it emphasizing the humility of this king.

And then in response to all this symbolism the people get up and they take off their outer coats and they throw them on the donkey and on the road and this is exactly again sometimes I feel like the bible is like a hypertext like you just click and it takes you somewhere else and so this is exactly what happens in second kings when the prophet Elisha anoints a guy named Jehu essentially to go and to undertake a coup d'etat to undertake the overthrow of an unjust ruler.

In that situation people throw their cloaks on the ground. And then the last couple of things here the leafy branches in this passage are reminiscent of a moment when the Jewish people were actually victorious when they were marching when Simon Maccabeus marched into the city victorious into the temple area and proclaim this moment of national restoration where people shout Hosanna save now they point to the coming kingdom and remember again the language of this passage is all about choreographed street theater and what it makes people think about what it makes people want to do what it excites in them he's riding high Jesus on the excitement of this peasant crowd their praises their acclamation and then he goes into the temple courts and what does he do y'all nothing nothing happens literally

Jesus goes into the temple courts looks around and nothing happens it's like the most anticlimactic moment that you can imagine and no victory is won nothing is restored no rightful king is crowned no nation is restored or people exalted Jesus looks around and walked out walks out that's the entire story here and this is how the week that leads to the death of Jesus begins a picture of a humble king riding into the center of empire of imperial Rome for the Jewish people and into the center of Jewish collaboration with Rome except there's one thing that you have to know there's one thing you have to know on the other side of the city there's another procession riding into town here's how Marcus Borg and John Dominique Crossan explain it two processions enter

Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30 it was the beginning of the week of Passover the most sacred week of the Jewish year one was a peasant procession the other and imperial procession from the east Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives cheered by his followers Jesus was from a peasant village of Nazareth his message was about the kingdom of God and his followers came from the peasant class and and on the opposite side of the city from the west Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria into Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers Jesus procession proclaimed the kingdom of God Pilate proclaimed the power of empire the two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus crucifixion so what you need to know about this scene this choreographed scene the scene that seems like it's bordering on the laughable this scene that reveals what

[ 25 : 27 ] Jesus is passionate about is that Roman soldiers are coming to the city because they didn't want riots to break out in the city because people were excited at Passover about liberation so soldiers are pouring into the city processing into the city and proclaiming the exact opposite of what Jesus the way of Jesus that we follow proclaim one procession is about war horses and weapons and the other centers around a donkey and a crowd of peasants and it just branches instead of weapons centers around the rabbi Jesus one embodies the concept of imperial permanence that this is the best of all possible worlds the other represents an invitation to an alternative way a way that is far from the corruption that validates forms of coercion that are baked into the status quo far from violence and domination if we believe that

Jesus reveals God and y'all know I hope you do then it's God who is riding into the city and is leading this procession this alternative procession into the city so here's the real question it's probably obvious by now but the question is whose story are you living inside of whose story whose procession do your feet follow day in and day out the one that is summed up by the war horse or the one that is really completely foolish on the face of it feels laughable takes incredible creativity the one that stands outside of the march of history but is really a dance of the least and the least likely that has been going on since the beginning of the world whose story is it the you have heard it said of empire and coercion and retribution and scapegoating or is it the but

I say to you of abundance and radical self giving love whose dream this is a hard question y'all but whose dream is your life fulfilling when Jesus enters the temple looks around and leaves he makes that God's dream is about not about restoring past glory it's not about national identity it's about liberation and creativity and beauty that saves the world ultimately what happens to Jesus on the cross can't be summed up the events of this week I can't sum up in at least not one point all right I love this list that Brian Zahn who's a pastor and writer gives he says that holy week and the cross does at least 12 things and here are some of them and these are things to take into your week as you're means the pinnacle of divine self disclosure it's divine solidarity with all human suffering it's the eternal moment in which the sin of the world is forgiven it's the enduring model of discipleship it's the overthrow of the

Satan it's the beauty that saves the world it's the refounding of the world around an access of love it's the supreme demonstration of God's love it's the sacrifice to end all sacrificing it's the abolition of war and violence it's the shaming of the principalities and powers it is the death by which death is conquered can I get a little amen there alright so when we center our contemplation this week I want us to think about these things that I cannot boil down for you that I cannot summarize so easily for you but I want to name that Jesus' passion was about an alternative way that's what the cross is getting at that's what this week is getting at you are invited to a parade of foolish faith foolish hope and foolish love one that leads to a table around which we commune with our enemies one that leads to washing the feet of those who don't and probably won't ever understand us one that leads to being betrayed and rejected and considered a criminal that leads ultimately to the cross may we walk in the footsteps y'all of the humble

God this week joining that dance which has been going on since the beginning of the world Amen God He in