What we see today looks like a parade, a group of people cheerfully welcoming the promised Messiah into Jerusalem, but the reality is something a bit darker. Jerusalem, of course, is the capital of Judea, the Roman Province to the south of Galilee, where Jesus is from. Like most capitals, Jerusalem is where all the powerful people live: the religious leaders, the political elites, the upper crust of Judean society. Although nobody likes being subject to Roman rule, these are the people who have learned how to live comfortably with it. They are perfectly happy for things to continue as they are.

To them, Jesus represents a threat. Matthew tells us that, when Jesus is born, King Herod is frightened, “and all Jerusalem with him.” Now, when he enters the city, he writes that they are thrown into turmoil. It’s not turmoil over the appearance of some upstart rabbi, but turmoil at the prospect of regime change.

Even we know what this looks like: a man riding triumphantly through the city gates, an adoring crowd thronging around him, strewing his pathway and singing his praises as he enters. It looks like a royal procession, like the welcoming party for a conquering general or visiting emperor. And that is exactly what it is. The crowds hail him as “Son of David,” rightful heir to the throne of Judea, and a prophet; they believe he is on God’s side—or perhaps that God is on his side. These crowds see him as their knight in shining armor, the sheriff in the white hat at high noon.

These crowds are probably thinking of the great leaders of the past who saved the nation and brought peace and prosperity. They’re thinking of King David, who led the nation to victory and safety. They’re thinking of King Josiah, who reformed the temple practices and did away with idol worship. They’re thinking of Judas Maccabeus, the rebel leader who overthrew the Greeks and gained Judean independence again. They expect him to ride in and “drain the swamp,” as it were. They are looking for a savior; but, ironically, Jesus isn’t the one they are looking for.

There are clues foreshadowing their disappointment all over. The parade in which Jesus is brought to the city is a parody of the kind of parade we would expect. Instead of a warhorse, Jesus rides a donkey; instead of appearing to heads of state or nobles, he is acclaimed by crowds of commoners and peasants. Instead of strewing his path with riches and jewels, people spread their cloaks and whatever branches they could snip from the surrounding trees.

We are told they see this as the fulfillment of prophecy, a sign that God was intervening to save them, but they apparently missed the significance of the prophecy because just a few chapters later, it is not the Pharisees or the leaders or the citizens of Jerusalem that cry for Jesus’ blood, it is the crowds—the same crowds, we are meant to imagine, that so recently hailed him as “Son of David” and “prophet.”

Steph and I watched a documentary on the Ghost Army of World War II, an American army division whose job was to feed disinformation to the Germans. They were in Luxembourg City just before the Battle of the Bulge, and had to be quickly evacuated so that the Germans would not learn of their existence if they broke through and took the city. One soldier recalls that, even before they left, the citizens of the city began flying swastikas from windows and balconies in anticipation of their “liberation” by the German forces. He said, however, that he didn’t blame them; instead of seeming fickle to him, they caused him to reflect on what it must be like to live in a warzone, always having to be ready to joyfully welcome their new overlords.

I can’t help but wonder if that’s the state we live in now. Although we aren’t at war, I wonder if we aren’t all keeping a few different flags around, just in case the winds should happen to shift. I’m not just talking politics. I wonder if we are always looking for that next candidate, sure, but that next get-rich-quick scheme or that next wonder diet or miracle drug that will bring us everything we think we our lives are missing. I wonder if we are just as fickle as the embattled Luxembougians or the Judean crowds.

The irony of today is that the crowds react to Jesus in the right way, but for the wrong reasons. They want a conventional savior savior, but they are looking for someone who will save them in a more conventional way, who will rule by the conventional type of force and govern with the conventional type of power. They want another David, another Josiah, another Maccabeus. Are we so different? Aren’t we always hoping and waiting for the next George Washington? Don’t we believe that if we can just elect another Abraham Lincoln all our troubles will be solved?

The history books are full of the names of men who tried to be the heroes to save their people; men who, with the best of intentions, rose to power to bring change. But somewhere along the way, their goals always shift from bringing change and salvation to maintaining their own power. We are always looking for the next George Washington, but we always seem to find the next Lenin, the next Pinochet, the next Hitler.

We are always looking for a more conventional type of savior, someone who will win according to the rules of the game we all play, someone who will wield the biggest gun or run the greatest government. We trust the game more than the players. This is what sets Jesus apart from us. Instead of trusting the game, he trusts God. He is willing to live according to God’s way, even if it means marching to his own death, because he knows that, in the end, losing God’s way is better than winning by playing according to the rules of the world.

That’s what St. Paul means when he says that Jesus humbled himself, that he was obedient unto death. We think of humility often in terms of self-deprecation, of obedience in terms of following orders. Jesus shows us that humility is more about putting ourselves second to the principles that guide us, that obedience is not about listening, but about trusting in something against all odds. He doesn’t die because God said, “go die,” he dies because God said “proclaim the good news,” and that’s what happens when one proclaims God’s good news.

We talk an awful lot in the Church about “belief” without really knowing what it means. As Christians, we are not called to believe *that* God exists, *that* God loves us, *that* Jesus is God’s son, *that* he died on the cross and rose again; we are called to believe *in* these things; in other words, to trust them as the true guiding principles of our lives and to live according to their truth.

I don’t have to believe *that* God exists to be a Christian; I do have to believe *in* what God is doing. It doesn’t matter whether or not I believe *that* God loves me, but if I believe *in* the power of God’s love to change the world, then that love will be the thing that drives me at my core and becomes the basis of all my words and actions. To be humble and obedient in the way of Christ is to trust in God’s way, God’s kingdom, above all else, even when it means putting our lives second.

That doesn’t always mean dying. Sometimes it means not running errands or visiting friends or going to work so that we can stay at home and keep from potentially spreading a deadly virus. Sometimes it means voting against a candidate we really like because they won’t stand up for the most vulnerable among us. But yes; sometimes it can even mean standing in front of a bulldozer or going to prison because we feel called to seek first the kingdom of God with our very life and freedom.

This is why we believe in Jesus, rather than in presidents or generals or revolutionaries; because salvation has never come from the people who play the game, no matter how well; it is something which can only come from the God who made us and who knows how we were intended to exist in this world God has made.

So let’s wave our palms, but let’s do it with a healthy sense of the irony of it all. So often, we follow Jesus for the wrong reasons, we expect a kind of salvation that he never promised. And yet, even as our shouts turn from “Hosanna” to “Crucify,” he continues to pour out his life for us, so that we may be saved.