

Sermon – Palm Sunday 2026 (Year A)

Scripture Texts: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Isaiah 5:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matt. 21:1-11
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *On Palm Sunday, and throughout Holy Week, the world is shaken in fulfillment of biblical prophecy. However, this shaking is not based in fear or a seeking for power, but in the coming of a new kingdom, rooted in the love and mercy and peace of God.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking “Who is this?”
 - a. Different kinds of turmoil:
 - i. Cities across our country were in turmoil yesterday, with millions marching in “No Kings” rallies to protest authoritarian actions by our government.
 - ii. I also think of the images coming from cities in the Middle East, of cities in turmoil as war rages, as bombs fall – not only on military targets but also on homes and schools and embassies.
 - b. The turmoil of Palm Sunday:
 - i. At first glance, the rallies of No Kings Day seem to be more like the turmoil of Palm Sunday, with our marching and shouting.
 - ii. But, it is interesting to look at the Greek word being used for turmoil, which comes from the root σειό (“say-o”); this is the root of our word seismic, and it speaks to the kind of shaking and turmoil that comes with earthquakes.
 - iii. So, perhaps the turmoil of war captures something that political rallies do not.
 - iv. Of the various Gospel accounts, Matthew alone uses this word to describe Holy Week, and does so repeatedly: we will see it again as Matthew describes earthquakes happening at the death of Jesus and again at his resurrection.
2. Misunderstanding prophecy
 - a. The story gets even more interesting when we recognize another feature that is unique to Matthew’s account of Palm Sunday: that Jesus is riding on not one, but two animals.
 - i. Every time I read this passage, I think about a movie from 1998, *The Mask of Zorro*. In this movie, Zorro is escaping from one of his heists, with a host of guards pursuing him on horseback. Without them noticing, he slips to the back of the group of guards, and begins to knock them out, one-by-one, collecting their horses as he goes. By the time there is only a single guard left, Zorro ends up riding two horses at once, standing on their saddles to give the last guard a special surprise.
 - ii. Now, I doubt that Jesus was riding two donkeys in such a dramatic fashion. Indeed, I question whether there actually were two donkeys present – after all, it’s a single animal in all of the other gospel accounts.

- iii. Matthew seems to introduce the second donkey because he has a goal of showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy about the Messiah. “This took place to fulfill...” (quoting both Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9).
 - iv. Matthew quotes the OT prophets multiple times in his Gospel, seeking to connect Jesus to the ancient Jewish hopes for a Messiah – and the texts that Matthew quotes here had come to be associated with the long-awaited king.
 - b. You can’t literalize poetry!
 - i. There is a problem, however, with Matthew’s use of these prophetic words. Zechariah does, indeed, talk about a king coming with salvation, riding on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey; but, the Hebrew prophets wrote in poetic language – and repetition is a regular feature of Hebrew poetry!
 - ii. Rather than adding a second animal, Zechariah is almost surely adding detail – poetically painting the scene.
 - iii. Matthew, in his hurry to show Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, literalizes the poetic imagery – a mistake that can lead to all manner of misunderstanding.
 - c. We are seeing the same problem when it comes to biblical prophecy in the news today.
 - i. According to a literal reading of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, there must be intense and violent warfare – what you could certainly describe as earth-shaking turmoil – in the Middle East before Jesus can return to set the whole world right.
 - ii. Many modern American Christians have bought into this violent reading, and are celebrating the current war in Iran. Worse, some of our military leaders have bought into this reading – and it seems to be shaping their policy and tactical decisions.
 - iii. But, as we have been exploring in our book group over the past couple of weeks, to read Revelation literally is to completely misunderstand the book – and Biblical prophecy as a whole.
- 3. Biblical prophecy redeemed
 - a. These misreadings are about claiming power and privilege, but biblical prophecy is almost always a challenge to the powerful.
 - i. Rather than making predictions about future events, the prophets use poetry and fantastical imagery to help the people of God make sense of the world in which they live – to recognize what is broken in the present time. They are closer to heralds or song-writers than to fortune tellers.
 - ii. In Revelation, rightly understood, the imagery of warfare is a critique of the ways of empire – showing how imperial powers claim to be wise and just in their use of force, but instead end up doing more harm than good.
 - iii. Similarly, the point of Jesus riding a young donkey into Jerusalem isn’t to fulfill prophecy and bask in the glory of being the Messiah. Rather, it is another challenge to the ways of empire. Scholars tell us that, at the same time as Jesus is entering Jerusalem from the east, the Roman governor (Pontius Pilate) would have been riding into Jerusalem from the west – on his war horse, leading a group of soldiers in a display of imperial power. Jesus is making an intentional contrast by riding a peace donkey.

- b. Prophetic Imagination.
 - i. And, that brings us to a second point about biblical prophecy: not only does it name and challenge what is wrong with the present world, it also helps us to imagine a better future.
 - ii. Rather than worshiping the might of Pontius Pilate and imperialistic strongmen around the world today, and rather than living in fear of them, we are called to welcome the prince of peace.
 - iii. While Matthew may have been mistaken in his use of prophecy, he understood the reality that Jesus is the Messiah – that he is God’s long promised king. This king comes not through domineering power, but sacrificial love – a love that is willing to suffer lies and false accusations and betrayals and even death in order to show us a better way.
 - iv. In the same way, the poetic imagery of Revelation insists that the powers of empire cannot last, but must eventually yield to the peace and justice and mercy and love of God – which are most fully revealed in the person of Jesus.
- c. A good turmoil
 - i. Ultimately, the point of Palm Sunday and of Holy Week is that the coming of Jesus does shake the world – but this shaking isn’t based on fear and destruction, or on the quest for ever greater power and control.
 - ii. Rather, it is the birth pang of a new and better world.
 - iii. May we, in this Holy Week, listen to the poetic language of the prophets, and resist the temptation to literalize it for the sake of power and control. May we have the courage to challenge the broken powers of this world, but to do so in love and hope. May we, most of all, catch the vision of the new world established in Jesus’ life and death and resurrection, and kneel before no other king.

Amen.