

Open the Gates!  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
April 10, 2022 Palm Sunday

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Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29  
Luke 19:28-40

My sister Alice has been visiting with me all weekend with her family. As I was preparing to speak with you about the Palm Sunday parade that welcomed in the one whom the crowd proclaimed as “the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” it got me thinking of the closest I’ve ever come to royalty. No, I have never met any royals whose name you would recognize. My most regal moment was as a young child, when my older sister, who was charged with taking care of me while our mom was at work, would lie on her back, and, using her feet as a throne, would hoist me high into the air and proclaim, “Hail, the Queen of Georgia!” I think I would even wear my satin-hemmed baby blanket, tied around my neck as my royal cloak. I knew I wasn’t *really* a queen, although I actually have a far-back memory of my sister explaining to me that states don’t have queens or kings, but governors (maybe there are some governors out there who need a civics lesson from my sister). Anyway, for a few moments of play-acting in those days, while I was up high, and my sister down low, she who preferred reading books in the solitude of her room was instead showering me with attention and singing praise *to me*, and I felt a little brush of regality.

Today, as we open the gates into Jerusalem, we join in a little play-acting, too. Upon entry into the city, we participate in a triumphant parade, shouting “Hosanna!”, waving palms, and casting our cloaks down to make an eclectic kind of red-carpet. Even as we parade, we know we are also opening the gates to what will happen next: a last supper; a betrayal, an arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Do we *really* want to open these gates? Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Jesus just headed for a distant land, continued to send spiritual wisdom through messengers to the people in Judea, and just died of old age.

But the Bible doesn’t give us that option, so, like the peasants and disciples lining the streets leading into Jerusalem, we watch, with some mixture of joy and dread, celebration and sorrow.

Jesus had come down from Bethany, where he had eaten with Mary Magdalene, Martha and their brother Lazarus. He passed through the Mount of Olives, and asked his disciples to run ahead of him and find a colt that had never been ridden, and say to its

owners that The Master needs it. In Matthew and Mark, they mention a donkey, and in Luke and John, the story tells it as Jesus riding a colt. Perhaps both were true and it was a *young* donkey, but regardless, I imagine this borrowed animal was a humble form of transportation.

We see Jesus' followers gathering to watch for Jesus' entry from the *east* gate of Jerusalem, where the Temple stood. However, on the *opposite* side of Jerusalem, at about the same time, the Imperial Parade with Pontius Pilate was also happening at the West gate. Think of it: at the same time that Jesus rode in on a borrowed animal, with donated, dusty cloaks as his saddle, Pontius Pilate would have ridden astride a war horse from the west side of Jerusalem. Snap of leather, clink of armor, shining of swords, thud of hooves, soldiers surrounding him, Pilate's arrival carried with it the prestige of empire, and it put on display the kind of violence that could come with it for those who did not fall into line.

Pilate was the Roman governor over Judea and the surrounding areas, and while he did not live in Jerusalem, each year he made his way into this ancient city, the city of David, for the Passover, since it was the holiest of weeks for the Jews. The Passover, we remember, tells the story of liberation of the Hebrews when they were captives. In a mighty reversal, the Egyptian army that kept the Hebrews enslaved were the ones who were swallowed up by the Red Sea. So you can imagine that the Roman authorities, who were the occupying power over Jerusalem, would get a *little nervous* and want to practice some crowd control in case any Jews tried to take those spiritual themes of liberation literally.

In addition, the Roman belief of the time was that the Emperor was the earthly manifestation of the divine. Pontius Pilate, as representative of the Emperor, carried with him that authority, and his presence in Jerusalem helped the belief in a holy Emperor take form and shape, giving a visual example of the hierarchy between Roman authorities and Jewish peasant class.

But Jesus' entry into Jerusalem set up a parody of what was happening at the same time Pilate was supposed to have his moment. Where Pilate modeled power, Jesus modeled peace. Where Rome represented prestige, Jesus represented the peasants. And yet, the glories proclaimed by the people watching Jesus went to the heavens, *not* to the emperor whom Pilate represented. ***This was going to be a problem for Jesus.***

What if Jesus had simply ridden in the other direction, and instead of heading into Jerusalem, he had headed into the mountains somewhere, and settled into a quiet existence, praying and practicing the peace which he proclaimed? We certainly know

other leaders— prominent and impactful ones— who have done just that; think of the Dalai Lama, who left Tibet due to political persecution; living away from his spiritual home, he has been able to cultivate a worldwide following as he shares teachings about peace and enlightenment.

But that is not the direction Jesus took. He went right to the heart of a city that would break his heart. “As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it.”

Looking at Jesus’ parade into Jerusalem as political satire reminds me of a TV show that was popular in Ukraine for many years, and is now also available to stream in the US. It’s called “Servant of the People.” In it, an actor-comedian named Volodymyr Zelensky plays a high school history teacher. I haven’t watched the show myself but as a review described, he was “Packing up his things after a class one day, when the history teacher spouts off to a friend, burning with frustration over the government’s corruption, the public’s apathy and how a secretive group of oligarchs – always depicted in dark rooms, scheming over luxurious food and drink – run everything from the shadows.”<sup>1</sup> His rant gets recorded by a student, who posts it to social media where it goes *viral*. He becomes so popular, and with the help of his students who fundraise for an election campaign, in a whirlwind election he becomes president.

Does art imitate life, or does life imitate art? In Ukraine, this TV show propelled Zelensky— the real man behind the character— to such popularity that he did in fact run for president in real life... and he won! The world was still figuring out what kind of leader this unexpected politician would become, when Russia waged war on Ukraine just 2 months ago; now, Zelensky is a household name.

Those who were in collusion with the Roman Empire, whether out of fear, or out of longing for the status and riches that association with Rome *might* bring, saw Jesus’ satirical parade for the threat it held. Jesus and his message could **go viral**. They knew that life, indeed, could imitate art and that what space Jesus had already taken up in the hearts of his followers was space that no longer could be owned by Rome. Some even tried to silence the crowd’s cheers: “‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, “‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’”

Jesus knew that by this point, the cat was already out of the bag. There was no turning back— even if they tried for silence, the rocks would continue the chorus begun by the people. Not just the people, but indeed God’s creation itself, was testifying to the glory of a humble man on a simple beast.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Deggans,” In ‘Servant of the People,’ viewers got a glimpse of the future President Zelensky” on *NPR.org* March 21, 2022

Matthew, Mark, and John report that the crowds chanted, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" However, Luke's gospel drops the Hosanna part and goes straight to "Blessed." The word *Hosanna* means, "Please! Save us!" Many Christians will proclaim that Jesus' death *is* what saves us; they say that his hanging on a cross is a substitute for the kinds of punishment we deserve for the sins we have committed.

This may sound heretical, but that is not what I believe. If you want to go on and believe that, if that belief enhances your sense of connection to God and helps you live a better life, go right ahead. As Presbyterians, we trust that the Holy Spirit moves each believer to faith, and we don't have to dictate just how that goes.

But I don't think an act of violence can save us. Instead, what I think Jesus saves us from is the idea that might makes right. I believe Jesus saves us by showing us that God enters into our vulnerability and our suffering, and demonstrates how holiness can be *right there*. As we see Jesus' body as a blessing, we come to see other bodies as blessings, too— even our own flawed bodies. I think God offers a way for us to look toward resurrection, so that the powers of death and destruction do not *get* to have the last word. These thoughts are saving me today. How about you?

One of our newer participants asked me last week as she looked through the schedule of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter: "Wow, you really go through all the motions of Jesus' last week, don't you?" Well, we try, as hard as it is. Most people want to skip past the pain, to the trumpets, the empty tomb, Easter lilies and the return of the Alleluias to the sanctuary.

But we offer this chance to play-act the less triumphant times, because there will be times in your life where you can't help but cry out, "Hosanna!" In other words, "Please, save me! Save us!" In those moments you will remember that there is no place, no suffering, no sighing, where you can go where Jesus has not yet been. There are no contours to your pain, that he hasn't felt himself. We know that whatever we bring to the foot of the cross, those are materials with which God can work, despite the world's expectations. Nothing is beyond God's capacity for transformation, ourselves included.

So let us enter into the parade, even though we know it is just a play-act. We need the practice, where high will be made low, and low will be made high, to believe in the sorts of absurd things that Jesus proclaimed.

Hosanna, and blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!