

## “Stories that Matter”

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2026

Matthew 21: 1-27

Imagine with me for a minute, India in 1930, almost 100 years ago. The country is under British colonial rule, which means it's important that the everyday people remember how great their rulers are and how small they are. In this case, the rulers had imposed a tax on salt, which had been going on for decades. This tax made it illegal to harvest salt outside of the British Empire, which meant that everyday people had to buy salt at extremely high rates. But it was more than just a money maker; it was about control and power. A 60 year old man, Mahatma Ghandi, had grown up with this salt tax and the economic and cultural consequences of it. He saw how cruel it was to tax such a basic human need and he wanted to do something about it. His supporters and allies for Independence said they didn't have any time for something as base as a war against the salt tax- there were bigger issues. But Ghandi saw in this particular struggle the heart of his people and particularly people who were poor. So Ghandi began his salt march. He walked 12 miles a day, camping at night to talk with the people, and after 240 miles, he reached the Arabian Sea. At the Sea, Ghandi bent down, and did something so simple, everyone thought that people would laugh. He gathered up salt. Thousands watched but no one was laughing as he reclaimed the dignity of his people. In this one act, as thousands then followed his lead and began to harvest salt, the law all of a sudden seemed ridiculous. Ghandi was reminding them that they were more than just subjects to an empire - they could claim what had always been theirs— something as simple as salt picked up from the shore. With each grain of salt that they picked up, the people began to feel what liberation could feel like and it was the British Empire that began to look ridiculous. Ghandi's march reminded the people of their own worth and dignity in the face of a system of violence and control.

Was it political? Of course. Was it religious? Yes, Ghandi described it that way. But what it did more than anything else was unite the people around their common humanity and dignity. It helped remind them of their connection to each other and to the earth - a way of peace and love running as a current through everything.

When we get to this story of palms and parades and people from the Bible this morning, we know that Jesus has been healing people; feeding people; showing people the Kingdom of God. He has been telling everyone about how it is that God's Spirit is with them and that everything around them is Holy. He has an interesting way of calling people in —he invites those with little power to recognize the power they have as children of God; and he invites those with power - army generals, religious leaders, tax collectors - to also see themselves as children of God and to see those

around them in the same way. All of this is important to understand as we witness what Jesus does today. But there's even more that we need to see in order to fully grasp this story.

Have you ever read a book or seen a movie and then realized it was part of a series? You may have enjoyed that particular story, but then when you go back and read the beginning or see the first movies, it all makes so much more sense. Or maybe, like me, you've had the opposite happen. Every time I see a Marvel movie now, I have to ask my kids how they are all connected because I can't remember. The Bible is a collection of books and so we can pick up the Gospel and read it and get a lot out of it, but if we haven't read or understood or remember the stories that come before, we're only getting a part of the story. Our clue this morning is that Jesus and the people are headed to the Temple to celebrate Passover. And what is the story of Passover, but a story of liberation.

Passover comes from the hundreds of years before when the Israelite people were slaves in Egypt and Moses was called by God to bring the people out of slavery. Moses was reluctant. After all, who wouldn't be hesitant to go to the most powerful person on earth, a guy who thought he was god, Pharaoh, and demand that he let his slaves go. Pharaoh was not keen on this idea. Plagues descended on the Egyptian people because Pharaoh won't let the Israelites go. There were frogs; locusts; all kinds of things that eat crops and create destruction and chaos, all meant to show Pharaoh that his enslavement of people was against God's will. Each time, through Moses, God would warn Pharaoh that the plague was coming and Pharaoh would agree to let the people go and then he would change his mind and keep the people enslaved. This went on and on until finally Moses tells Pharaoh that unless he lets the people go, all of the violence that Pharaoh has poured onto the people who were enslaved will instead rest on the firstborn Egyptian children and still Pharaoh refuses to let them go. So the night before this horrendous plague, the Israelite people make a sign over their doorways so that the angel of death will not come to their homes — and in a reverse of who has privilege and power and who does not, death passes over the houses of those who are enslaved and strikes those who have been hoarding wealth and power for generations. And then, as the Egyptians mourn, Moses quickly leads the people out of Egypt. Pharaoh, stuck in his violent ways even in the face of his own grief, still chases them and they barely make it out. But God through Moses and Miriam lead the people out of slavery and from then on each year they celebrated this day that they call Passover - the time when God's mercy came and caused violence to pass over their households, bringing liberation.

Hundreds of years later, in our Gospel this morning, all of the Jewish people, descended from the Israelites, are streaming to the Jerusalem temple- the place where God lives- to celebrate Passover. It is a high holy day full of celebration and joy. But along with all of that joy, there is also lament and anger because while the people are not exactly enslaved, they also are not free. Rome has moved in with what they call peace, which really just means that the violence comes from the top and squelches anything that looks like it might be threatening.

So the tension in town during Passover is high. Because Passover isn't about survival; it's about liberation. And so when we see Jesus ask for a donkey to ride on with words from the prophet Zechariah who rode into town proclaiming peace; when we hear the crowds shout "Hosanna!" which literally means SAVE US; when we hear the Jewish religious leaders get anxious at the crowds that are gathering because of the attention it will garner from Rome, we see that this is indeed a political act. It is a religious act. And then the writer of the Gospel of Matthew says that the earth shakes as Jesus passes by - that the earth acknowledges that his compassion and justice is the real authority here; and Jesus says if the people don't cry out even the stones will cry out.

You see, this is not a stand alone story. This is a continuation of liberation for the people. This is God's creation singing God's praises. This is a revolution. But it's not the revolution Rome fears, a bloody and violent revolution. No, it's actually much more dangerous to Rome. Jesus shows his power and authority by walking with the local people rather than with armies. He rides into Jerusalem with the power of compassion rather than violence. He faces Rome with the authority and integrity of telling truth rather than the lies of empire. Jesus restores dignity and hope, reminding the people that human empires come and go; Rome is just temporary. Jesus is showing them the way of liberation. Jesus invites them in to see that they are all connected; that they are all part of a much bigger kingdom, the Kingdom of God; and that the separations they see and live into every day are just distinctions made up by empire. Jesus is coming to save, but not in the way the crowds anticipate. He won't abolish our enemies - he is teaching us to love them, knowing that some of our enemies are us. He won't bomb those who are inconvenient to us because he is not aimed at getting power for himself. In all that he does, even in this show of power and authority, Jesus is emptying himself; reminding all of us that we have what we need right in front of us - that we can live into the Kingdom of God.

This story matters because the forces of our world right now want us to pick sides, to focus on domination and control, to make enemies of one another and they are even using Jesus' name to do so. But God is inviting us into a different way — to follow

Jesus in the way of peace that comes from connection with one another, with creation, with God.

Today many of us will gather at Lake George while other Christians gather at the state capitol, as well as in Rochester and Duluth and Wilmar and in several other states. We're calling it the Palm Sunday Action, but I like to refer to it as putting the protest back in Palm Sunday. We're gathering to proclaim that Christ is our King, not any human ruler. There will be joy; there will be lament; there will be truth telling as we name those who have been taken from our community; and there will be singing and connection with our neighbors as we proclaim that every person has value and dignity. We will renounce the forces of violence in the world and instead walk with our palms waving above our heads, proclaiming Jesus' way of peace. Save us, Lord. Save us from ourselves. Show us the way.