

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
2 April 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Palm Sunday

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“The Children Cry Out”

Final Sermon in the Series, *Courage & Kin-dom* (Annual Theme: “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Matthew 21:1-17

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

It’s a familiar scene: the exciting parade of the crowd waving palms and throwing cloaks down on the road for Jesus on his donkey as they shout, “*Hosanna! Blessed is the One Who Comes in the Name of the Lord!*”

Year after year, we re-enact this familiar scene – smiling, singing, processing, waving palms – as if we don’t know the end of the story. We do this even though in just a handful of days we’ll be back in this same place, re-enacting the cries of the crowd yet again, but instead of saying *Hail Him* we’ll be saying *Nail Him*.¹ At least, some of us will be. For some reason, Good Friday services are not nearly as well attended as Palm Sunday and Easter. Go figure. It’s probably because our lives are full of so much suffering that we just simply *need* the celebration – even when it doesn’t match reality.

More than a parade to the hill of crucifixion, we treat Palm Sunday as a prelude to Easter. Think about it. We book end Holy Week with *Hosannas* and *Alleluias*, Palms and Lilies, Shofar and Brass – all signs and symbols of celebration.

The absurdity of the Palm Sunday celebration surfaces when you imagine your own loved one in this situation. Envision someone you love right now. Now think of cheering them on – as if they are about to cross the finish line at the Olympics – knowing that right after they cross that line, they will endure unthinkable torture, abuse, humiliation, isolation, and death.

Still waving your palm now?

To be clear: this is *not* a Victory March.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Cring,” *The Corners* (10 April 2022), accessed on April 2, 2023 at <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/palm-sunday>.

And while the crowd may not know this, surely the disciples do. Because Jesus has been telling them about his upcoming suffering and death:

Just a few chapters earlier in *Matthew 16:21-22* we read:

“...Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed...Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “*Never, Lord!*” he said. “*This shall never happen to you!*”

Disbelief.

One chapter later in *Matthew 17:22-23*:

“When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him...*’ And the disciples were filled with grief.”

Grief.

And then just one chapter before our passage today, in *Matthew 20:17-19*:

“...Jesus took the Twelve (the *Twelve!*) aside and said to them, ‘*We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified...*’”

Silence. (There was no response that time from the disciples.)

Three times Jesus tells them This Is Going to Happen. Their responses: Disbelief. Grief. And then, maybe the silence is the sinking in of Belief.

The disciples know this is not a Victory March. Their faces would be the somber ones in the crowd, realizing the subversive nature of Jesus’ actions. That Jesus is orchestrating this whole processional to mock Rome.

He's mocking the Ruling Powers that Be by – on the one hand, processing into the city as the Powers that Be would, yet, on the other hand, doing so in a way that is opposite the way Rome would it, in a way that looks almost silly. He's riding a low-stature, domestic donkey as opposed to a mighty, well-trained military horse, and Jesus

is being surrounded by a crowd with low-budget (free) items like leafy branches and personal coats, rather than flanked by ranking soldiers with high dollar weapons and nationalistic flags.

Make no mistake. Jesus knew the political unrest he was causing against Rome with this processional parade. And, almost seamlessly he moves from a political statement to a religious one...against not outside, foreign powers, but the very leaders in his own faith tradition – the Priests and the Scribes and the Temple Treasury.

Thanks to the Narrative Lectionary, this year on Palm Sunday we get to follow Jesus from the outskirts of Jerusalem into the very heart of the city itself – the Temple. God's House. The Place of God's Presence. The Place where People Gather. It was Passover remember. Everyone is streaming into the city this week – from all over everywhere; they were headed to the same Final Destination – the Temple.

If Jesus had a good-size crowd following him in from outside the city, by the time he made it to the Temple, that crowd would have grown exponentially. This

was The Spot. And it makes sense, doesn't it? That the First Day of Holy Week, the Beginning of the End, begins where people are most conditioned to meet God, see God, praise God, experience God.

And into that joyful familiarity, into that excitement and celebration – Jesus turns their expectations upside down. Their world upside down. Their way of doing things upside down. Literally.

First, Jesus drives out all the people who were selling and buying in the Temple. You see, people had to buy animals for sacrifice for Passover – and, for convenience, that buying and selling happened at the Temple. This means the Temple treasury oversaw a massive Temple economy involving various supplies for the Temple's functioning. Sounds innocent enough, right? Someone needed to pay the light bill and keep the boiler going.

But – the Temple treasury ALSO collected the temple tax and it functioned as a bank, exchanging currencies from all the different regions around that were gathering in Jerusalem for Passover. And all of this

happened under Roman supervision, so allied elite agents profited from this activity.² Think of it as someone (or several someones) was getting a cut off the top (a very healthy cut). So Jesus drives everyone out who is participating in this system – buyers *and* sellers, those *intentionally* profiting from it and those innocently or naively or passively participating in it out of necessity (because there was no other system to get an animal to sacrifice). And Jesus says ALL of them were wrong. The hard truth is that unjust systems thrive on the oxygen of those of us who participate in them – knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally. They’ll only die when we stop giving them air. It’s simple Economics 101 – Supply and Demand. Jesus disrupts it all – and says, “*All of you. Get Out.*”

Second, Jesus moves his focus from people to things. He overturns the physical tables of the money changers. It’s like an exclamation point to his previous point. He doesn’t want people scattering now, only to come back in an hour or so and

just cozy back up to their same tables of commerce without consequence.

This reminds me of how I participate in unhealthy capitalism even when I know better. Even if I have a day where I try not to support companies that abuse workers or monopolize industries – the very next day, I get lazy – and say, “just this one time.” But I think Jesus knows this about us and so he destroys their whole infrastructure all together...he takes away the temptation by Turning the Tables.

Perhaps a modern day analogy would be Jesus hacking into Amazon with some kind of virus or bug that brings down the entire website in one instant. Yikes, right? I mean, not only do I buy things on Amazon, my husband and I sell things on Amazon! But because even well-intentioned people can’t seem to stop using the same systems in our society (sometimes the only systems we have) that keep us trapped in giving more and more profits to fewer and fewer people – Jesus crashes the system altogether. He pulls the plug.

² Warren Carter, “Commentary on Matthew 21:1-17,” *Working Preacher* (2 April 2023), accessed on April 2, 2023 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/triumphal-entry-3/commentary-on-matthew-211-17-3>.

Whew. Who knew that waving palms could be so prophetic?

No wonder the city was in turmoil. Turmoil, which in the Greek, literally means “shaking,” as in ‘earth quaking, foundation-breaking, shakin.’

Third, it’s into this shaking city, that Jesus gives voice – prophetic voice – to his actions. Remember when Jesus came into the city the people in the city said, “*Who is this?*” And the crowds answered, “This is the *prophet* Jesus...” Well, Jesus is merely following in his own prophetic tradition here.

The first quote evokes Isaiah 56, a vision of an inclusive society which includes even the eunuch and foreigner: “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations,*” (Isaiah 56:7). The Temple has been failing to function as a house of prayer for all people (some have been excluded, i.e. the blind and lame and other marginalized folks hanging out outside) and Jesus wants them to know it.

The second text, which references ‘den of robbers’ is

from Jeremiah 7:11. “When this phrase is used in Jeremiah, the prophet stands before the Temple and indicts its leaders for breaking the law (indicts its leaders for breaking the law³ – *pause*) and not staying true to God’s justice. Jeremiah, speaking with the voice of God, lists a number of sinful things that the temple authorities routinely engage in, then accuses them of believing that they are safe in the temple: “Will you [commit these sins], and then come and stand before me in this [Temple]...and say ‘we are safe’ – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this [Temple]...become a den of robbers in your sight?” Jeremiah asks.⁴

“The word translated most commonly as “robbers” actually has a more violent meaning to it. It is more akin to “destroyer.” This is not a simple “robber” who steals things, but a violent person – someone who commits acts of violence against others – which may, of course, include violent robbery...So when Jeremiah says that the temple has become a den of “robbers,” he is saying that it has become a place full of “violent people.””⁵

³ Former President Donald J. Trump was indicted this week.

⁴ B. Scott Christmas, “A Den of Robbers,” *Serene Musings* (6 June 2010), accessed on April 2, 2023 at

<http://serene-musings.blogspot.com/2010/06/den-of-robbers.html>.

⁵ Christmas, *ibid*.

But even more important than the word ‘robbers’ is the word ‘den.’ The Hebrew word for ‘den’ means “cave.” “Jeremiah is talking about a place where violent people congregate – literally a hideout. The Temple, then, is not a place where violent people go to *commit violence*, but a place *where violent people go to hide*.

Robbers, after all, don’t rob inside a cave. They hide inside a cave. The context of the passage makes this clear. As seen above, Jeremiah says that these people commit violent acts of sin, then go to the temple and say “we are safe” and they are kept safe by ‘The Powers that Be.’⁶

With this context, Jesus’ use of the phrase becomes clear. Jesus is condemning a system that oppresses the Jewish people in the name of the Temple – that is, in the name of God.⁷ He condemns the Temple for being a place where things are covered up, glossed over, protected, and allowed to happen without consequence. Jesus calls out the leaders within his own faith that were collaborating with Rome...covering up their unjust ways. Sugarcoating them. Or worse. Redefining them and

justifying them “in the name of God.”

I am to point fingers at government leaders who do not watch out for the interests of God’s people...but what if we, too, in the Temple, in the Church, are those people too?

Whew. (*wave palm*)

And then – Jesus does a fourth thing. He heals the blind and the lame. It is perhaps the most expected act of Jesus; the crowds were used to him doing this in Galilee. But healing the blind and lame has an even deeper meaning here on the Temple grounds. As one scholar puts it, “Jesus heals those who are ailing as an act of repairing somatic damage caused by imperial practices.”⁸

The blind and the lame were not allowed into the Temple; they were not ritually pure. The blind and the lame were not cared for as they should have been by their ‘church’ or their ‘government.’ Where was all this tax money going? Where were all these Temple offerings going? Were they not being used to help those who needed it most? It is not a coincidence

⁶ Christmas, *ibid*.

⁷ Christmas, *ibid*.

⁸ Carter, *ibid*.

that Jesus performs an act of healing directly following these acts against political, economic, and religious abuse. They are tied together.

The chief priests and the scribes are angry. And what are they angry about? Jesus healing the blind and the lame and the *children* crying out as they praise Jesus.

What is so threatening about people being healed and children being heard?

Turns out, quite a lot.

Because if the blind and lame are healed, that means their voice becomes a vote – meaning – they will start to attend Temple, they will be empowered to live more fully in society and speak up and out against the powers that had been oppressing them. Never mind they will be able to participate more fully in society in ways that utilize new gifts and ways of seeing and being. We already know from what Jesus taught us earlier in this gospel that when the blind are able to see, they show us the things we have been missing.

But this is exactly what the authorities are afraid of.

I wonder – how many times do we as a society get complacent about systems that keep people suffering and marginalized and in poverty and in systems that make it impossible for them to succeed because we know that if they did succeed, if they did rise up, if they did achieve their dreams – somehow we who have more power or privilege think it will take away from our own dreams and or our own success? Jesus says ‘no’ to this scarcity mindset. Jesus says – there is enough for everybody. Everybody gets power. Everybody gets privilege. There is enough healing, enough grace, enough food, enough money, enough housing, enough rights. There is enough. Jesus says. ENOUGH!

But the scribes and chief priests won’t have it. They say to their fellow rabbi, Jesus – do you hear what the children are saying? Do you hear their cries?

This is just like when Herod ordered all the male babies under age two to be massacred at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel? Why? Because he was scared of baby Jesus. Afraid of a child. But it’s not just the Herods of the world. It’s us too! You and me!

Because just two chapters earlier in Matthew 19:13-14 we read,

“Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the *disciples* (The disciples! The ones who were followers of Jesus...i.e. you and me...) the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*”

It's not just the Powers that Be that refuse to hear the cries of the children, it's the Disciples too...the ones who most closely follow Jesus. The *Disciples*. The Faithful, Well-Intentioned Church Going Folks.

“*Let the little children come to me and do not stop them...*”

Jesus says, “Yes, I hear what the children are saying...have you not heard it before? Read Psalm 8. Psalm 8, which says:

“*Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have

established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:1-4)

Through the mouths of children our enemies are silenced. Through the praises of children we realize the majestic creation of each and every person.

We recall the prophet Isaiah:

“*And a child will be born unto you...*” (Isaiah 9:6)

“*...and a little child shall lead them...*” (Isaiah 11:6)

Why does it always take kids to remind us of what matters. Of *Who We Are* and *Whose We Are*. We are Beloved Children of God. Children of our Majestic Creator.

“*Do you hear what the children are saying?*” the Scribes and Priests asks.

“I do,” says Jesus. “But do you?” *Do You* – the religious powers that be that run my

house and proclaim my kingdom (*point to me*)...*Do You* – my disciples (*point to the congregation*)...Do YOU hear the children?

The children are crying out.

“Hosanna to the Son of David.”

Hosanna.

You know what Hosanna means?

Save us.

Save us.

Save us Jesus. Save us.

Why? Because Our government is not saving us. Our police are not saving us. Our schools are not saving us. Our religions and religious leaders are not saving us. Our community is not saving us. *Nobody* is saving us.

“HOSANNA!” the children are crying out.

Palm Sunday is a convicting reminder for all of us who claim to follow Christ: we cannot celebrate Jesus without centering the children who are crying out to him.

And the children are still crying out today.

They are spilling out from East High School in Denver and The Covenant School in Nashville. Our children are showing up at Community meetings like the one this past Tuesday at New Hope, in which school district leaders and faith leaders and Denver’s chief of police and Colorado’s Attorney General and therapists and leaders of youth mentoring groups...were all gathered to talk about mental health and gun violence. And after all the panelists had spoken and given their perspectives on how we can make our schools safer, our homes safer, how we can give away free gun locks, how we can invest in youth, how we can look for the signs of distress and mental unrest, how we can pour money into mental health, how we can lobby our representatives to pass common sense gun control laws that make it harder to get a weapon than a driver’s license, after we adults had talked about how the highest killer of children and youth used to be car accidents and now it is death by gun violence and how we can’t seem to pass laws equivalent to “wear your seat belt, lessen speed limits, make airbags mandatory” because “driving a car is not a

right” and “owning a gun *is* a right” and therefore the same logic doesn’t seem to work on trying to prevent death...etc...

After we adults had lobbied ideas and concerns back and forth --- the mic was finally given to a student from East High School.

John Bailey, the Chair of the Colorado Black Round Table and Moderator of the Evening asked the student,

“What do *you and your classmates* want?”

Do you know what the student said?

*We want to feel safe.
We want to go to school without fear.
We don’t want to die.*

Bailey followed up, “What do *you* want us adults to do?”

Come Together. We want you to come together. Stop taking sides; stop pitting safer gun legislation against mental health resources. We need it all. Quit arguing about your different solutions and just do whatever your solution is. We need every solution from every side. Put our lives above your

rights. That’s what we want. We need you to come together because we’re falling apart.

Our children need us. This is about all of us. Not just elected leaders. All of us can invest in youth. All of us can raise our voice and protest. All of us can educate about safer gun laws; all of us can give away gun locks. All of us can invest in mental health – the training of professionals and work for access to those services. All of us can talk about therapy and destigmatize it. All of us can say – this is unacceptable. All of us can say to our students: You Matter. We See You. We Value You. We Hear Your Cries.

School shooting after school shooting continues to silence the voices of our children and as the ones that survive cry out – we, adults and authorities with power; we, disciples and followers of Jesus; WE continue to let their cries go unanswered.

The consequences of our choice has never been clearer. We choose ‘protecting’ the halls of our policy makers and schools and religious institutions which have become ‘dens’ and ‘caves’ that let injustice hide out in plain sight...where we normalize ‘how things are’ as

‘okay.’ When they are not. They are not okay.

John Bailey ended the evening by saying, *“It’s no longer about who is responsible for the school shootings and our culture that glorifies guns while also stigmatizing mental health. We are all responsible at this point. We have to own that. The question is – how will we be responsive? We must move from responsibility to responsiveness. And once we realize we can do something – and we CAN do SOMETHING...then we won’t be able to live with ourselves if we don’t.”*

I wonder if that’s what Jesus was thinking too. That last week of his life, riding into Jerusalem to the cheering crowds. He could have settled for praise and admiration, but he knew he couldn’t live with himself if he let injustice and corruption just keep happening...status quo.

Here's the thing about the children crying out to Jesus: *Hosanna! Save us!* When they cry *Hosanna* today, they actually *are* crying out to us. *We* are the hands and feet of Christ today. We are the ones who embody Jesus’ love and teaching today. We are the ones Turning over the Tables today,

driving out people and policies that exclude, upending systems that harm, healing the blind and the lame. We are the ones who must hear (and heed) the cries of our children today: *Hosanna. Save Us.*

For surely we cannot sing the *Alleluias* of Easter without first answering the cries of *Hosanna*.

Amen.