

## “Is It I?”

A sermon for the Congregational Church of Salisbury  
Salisbury, Connecticut

Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday • 14 April 2019

The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson

Today St. Luke’s gospel takes us all the way to the cross. From jubilant palm-waving, through betrayal and a rigged trial, to the Roman Empire’s version of an electric chair in public view. We go to the foot of the cross. Yet we go there knowing what the disciples did not yet know: that love outlasts life. That God’s grace will survive the seeming end of hope. God’s *shalom* — that great mystery of wholeness and harmony, and justice and joy — will conquer even death.

---

### 1

The story of Palm Sunday made the cut into all four of the gospels. The cheering crowds; the palm branches or cloaks, spread spontaneously to carpet the way for an itinerant rabbi dubbed an unlikely ruler; the donkey or colt, the humblest of mounts.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all had different agendas and their gospels proclaim the different things they thought important about the life of Jesus. But all of them included this one: the unexpected, humble entry into Jerusalem.

The birth of the Christ child doesn’t make the cut in all the gospels, just two of them.

The Lord’s Prayer, which we said a few minutes ago — which today will be recited in thousands of languages, in places from tin-walled shacks in Uruguay to mega-churches in Singapore to hospital bedsides — that prayer got into two of the gospels.

Walking on water? Three out of the four. The Good Samaritan? Told in one out of the four.

But Palm Sunday, and the passion that followed, belongs to that category of events that all the gospels needed to tell.

---

### 2

The disciples and the circle of Jesus’ followers stepped out in jubilation. Crowds larger than ever before. There had been hundreds when he taught near the shore — so many he put out in a boat in order to be seen and heard by them all. There were thousands when he performed the miracle of feeding. But this day, the crowds reached a whole new level. Luke said they praised God joyfully, with loud voices calling, “Blessed is the King who comes in God’s name!”

The story builds to a climax. It’s also among the most explicitly political of all gospel scenes. I know most church folk like to leave politics outside the door so you can go ahead and start fidgeting now, but there’s no getting around this one. One Bible scholar after another reminds us what all the people in knew well: from the west the Roman governor entered Jerusalem on a warrior’s steed, accompanied by the steel and might of the world’s superpower, endorsed by religious leaders. And from the east Jesus entered on the lowliest of mounts, accompanied by cries of “Hosanna!” — “*You* are our ruler, who comes in the name of God!” There it is: political power versus God’s humility. Domination over the world versus utterly self-

giving love. Jubilant crowds chose an alternative to the empire. But the crowds would not stay with him for long. You and I probably wouldn't, either. His way was just too hard.

“Love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you”: you have to wonder if many people followed Jesus in spite of that lesson, not because of it. Dorothy Day wrote the tough truth: “I really love God only as much as the person I love the least.” I don't want to measure my love for God that way. I want to think I'm doing better than that. I want to love God even when I haven't achieved love for my enemies. Can't be, said Jesus. You really love God only as much as the person you love the least.

“Those who want to be my disciples will have to take up their cross and follow me,” Jesus said. If he had had a publicist, this line would have been cut. It seems designed to reduce the number of followers, rather than to increase them.

---

### 3

On Sunday the thousands cheered him and laid a carpet of palms. But the crowds would not last. On Thursday he would sit at the Passover meal with the twelve, and tell them that one would betray him. “Is it I?” they asked one another.

I find this question so poignant, so heart-piercing. “Is it I?” One of the twelve knew what he had planned. Why did the eleven other ask the question? Did they know that despite months and months of commitment to Jesus and his mission, all their dedication could be undone in a moment?

“Is it I who will turn from you?” The question belongs not just to Holy Week, but to every moment of decision. Is it I who will see a person mugged and left lying in the street and find a reasonable justification to walk on by?

Is it I who will attempt to step out of the boat onto the water and then lose my grip on faith and start to sink? Is it I who will remain in the boat, not daring even to try?

Will I extravagantly pour out an entire jar of perfume, worth three years' salary, because my devotion is just that great? Or is it I who will stand back as a spectator, casting silent judgment on such a costly, emotional display?

Is it I whom Jesus will call to watch with him in the garden of Gethsemane, then give in to my exhaustion and fall asleep?

Is it I who will form up with the crowds to see what Pilate will do, and say nothing as my neighbor shouts, “Crucify him!”

---

### 4

Yes. Of course. It is I.

A reading from the gospel of Luke:

<sup>24</sup> So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. <sup>25</sup> He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished. <sup>26</sup> As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. <sup>27</sup> A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. <sup>28</sup> But Jesus turned

to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.<sup>29</sup> For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.'<sup>30</sup> Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.'<sup>31</sup> For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

<sup>32</sup> Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.<sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."<sup>35</sup> And they cast lots to divide his clothing.<sup>36</sup> And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"<sup>37</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"<sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"<sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"<sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."<sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."<sup>43</sup> He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

<sup>44</sup> It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,<sup>45</sup> while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.<sup>46</sup> Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.<sup>47</sup> When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."<sup>48</sup> And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts.<sup>49</sup> But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

A strange and wondrous gift of this heart-rending story is that we join the disciples in the jubilant crowd, and we join the disciples at Jesus' table, and we join the disciples in their terror and confusion. We have been there before; this week we go there again. We confront the unbearable burden: we have not stopped crucifixion. We watch God's children die, to appease the empire. We go to the foot of the cross.

Oh — and another gift of this strange, terrible story: the first one to perceive that God had just turned the universe upside down, on the pivot of a cross, was a centurion. One trained in the culture of death, who undoubtedly formed up with the empire's forces on the way into Jerusalem, now stood outside the city, on an ignominious hill called "The Skull," exclaiming: Truly this man was innocent!

---

## 5

The universe has just spun on the pivot of a cross. We go there. Yet we go there knowing what the disciples did not know: that love outlasts life. That God's grace will survive the seeming end of hope. God's *shalom* — that great mystery of wholeness and harmony, and justice and joy — will conquer even death.

Take heart, beloved. For now we are in the nighttime of weeping, but joy comes with the morning. Is it I — I who cheered one moment and jeered the next? I who sang in jubilation and fell silent in fear? — is it I for whom God upended the universe? Yes. It is I. It is you. Yes.