

**FLIPPED: The Slave Becomes King, A Palm Sunday Sermon**  
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**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**March 20, 2016**

*Mark 11: 1-11*

Palm fronds... a beautiful symbol of all far-away places, sunny and warm. Hold onto yours and imagine a large, ancient city under bright springtime sunshine. It's the annual festival of Passover and people are pouring in from surrounding towns and villages.

They stream toward the Holy City to celebrate the "*passing over*" of the angels of death in long-ago Egypt. They remember their ancestors' escape from slavery under the oppressive Pharaoh, the long journey through the wilderness to a place where future generations may dwell.

Celebrating Passover in Jerusalem would have been a lifelong dream for the average pilgrim. The travelers are tired but eager as they round the Mount of Olives and catch their first sight of the glowing city. They are awestruck by the four miles of encircling stone walls, and there in the middle of the city, the shining gold-embellished Temple.

King Herod has been hard at work transforming the city for over 30 years by the time these celebrants arrive. A Jewish puppet king despised by his own people, Herod believed prestige and power were everything, so he built palaces, citadels, amphitheaters, viaducts, public monuments, casinos and hotels (*ok, maybe not those*)... Pilate even renovated the most holy Temple... all to gain prominence and esteem.

But as grand and beautiful as it is, Jerusalem is a city on edge. Residents and visitors alike strain under the tax burden and the offensive idol-worship of their Roman occupiers. Racial and religious tensions are on the rise, and the gap between the rich and the poor seem to be ever increasing.

The more things change, the more they stay the same, huh?

Those who followed Jesus into the city are hoping against hope that he was the Messiah, sent to bring in a new era of justice... and vanquish the occupiers. They want their Holy City and their Temple back and the Romans gone. This is the Jerusalem Jesus and his disciples approached on what we now celebrate as Palm Sunday.

Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have studied this period in Jerusalem's history, and suggest that there very well might have been two processions entering Jerusalem on that same fateful day.<sup>1</sup>

The one we just heard about from the Gospel of Mark was made up of mostly peasant farmer types who have followed Jesus into town. He sat astride a donkey colt and rode through the Golden Gate on the East of the city, surrounded by the crowd crying out "*Hosanna*," which is Aramaic for "*Save us, we pray.*"

At the same time, on the Western side of the city, a second procession enters the Jaffa Gate: the Roman governor of the region, Pontius Pilate, and his entourage. Perhaps he has been summoned by his superiors. I can't imagine Pilate being very excited to make the journey from his seaside villa to such a hot, tense and overcrowded place.

*"Really, Pilate, you ought to get over to the city for Passover! Bring some law and order; the place is crawling with riff-raff, criminals and protestors and brazen preachers and healers and possibly even armed rebels! Make a big statement, Pilate – imperial cavalry and tough-looking soldiers and all that!"*

What a contrast: Through one gate, imperial power and might, swords and snapping flags, prancing steeds and armored soldiers. Shock and Awe. Impressive.

Through another gate, excited but weary commoners on foot, throwing their coats on the ground, ripping palm leaves from the trees lining the street, a preacher/healer man on a donkey. Not so impressive.

What the head of each procession ride in to the city is a power statement.

By riding a warhorse, it is quite clear that Pilate believes that the strongest kind of power is the kind you can take.

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<sup>1</sup> The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem" (2007)

And by riding a donkey, Jesus flipped their expectation on its head. There will be no epic showdown or battle scene, and the only life that will be lost will be his. By the end of the following week, this King will be nailed to a cross. Real power, God's power, is not about force, shock and awe. God's love is the power of sacrificial self-giving, peace, compassion and mercy.

Many of you here are fans of Harry Potter, the adolescent wizard star of a series of fantasy novels by J. K. Rowling. Her books are the most sold ever, over 450 million copies. All seven books of her books have been made into movies.

There is, throughout the series, a villain, an evil wizard named who? Lord Voldemort (aka "He Who Should Not Be Named"). At the end of the first book, Harry Potter learns that Voldemort murdered both his parents when Harry was only a baby. He first murdered Harry's father and then tried to murder Harry, to be sure that the boy, as his father's heir, would not be a threat as he grew to maturity.

But, of course, he did not succeed. When Voldemort raised his wand to enact the curse that would end the child's life, Harry's mother Lilly throws herself in the way, taking the blow and dying in her son's place. When Voldemort then tries to kill Harry again, it turns out that he cannot. In fact, the curse that he hurls at Harry rebounds onto Voldemort and drains him of his powers. All he can do is leave a lightning-bolt scar across Harry's forehead.

Because of his mother's sacrificial love, Harry lives and Voldemort's powers are greatly diminished. Throughout the novels, others in the magical world will recognize young Harry because of his scar. And when he enters wizarding school; his peers will alternate between treating him like a messiah or treating him like an outcast.

Voldemort makes repeated attempts to capture and kill Harry Potter as he grows in wisdom and wizarding skills, but each time he fails. Finally, Harry asks the wise Headmaster of his school, Professor Dumbledore, why Voldemort could not kill him, and this is his response:

*"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark . . . To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin . . . [Voldemort] could not touch you for this reason. It is agony to touch a person marked by something so good."*<sup>2</sup>

The reason Harry Potter could not be killed was his mother's sacrificial love for him. And sacrificial love is the paradoxical kind of power which Jesus taught and enacted. It may not be a scar on our forehead but the cross around our necks that remind us we too are the recipients of a sacrificial, everlasting love – each and every one of us.

And it's our turn now, our turn to show the world what God looks like, to show the world what love looks like, to show the world what it looks like to love your enemies, not only your enemies, but the immigrant and the foreigner, the stranger, and the other.

It's our turn now to show the world what it looks like to forgive those who trespass against us, to forgive that one not once, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. Show the world.

In a world which seems to worship violence and power a little more each day, it is now our turn to show our friends, our families, our neighbors, our colleagues, what it looks like to follow the Prince of Peace, to put away our swords and study war no more.

In a merciless might-makes-right world, red in tooth and claw, it's our turn to show the world what mercy looks like, God's mercy. It's our turn, now, today. For Christ's sake, give witness to mercy. Show the world what God looks like and watch it turn on its head.

It won't be easy. It may even cost you your life.

It was on Palm Sunday that his disciples began to understand just how costly and rigorous life as a Jesus-Follower can be. Today's disciples train for it as an athlete trains for a race: rehearsing the virtues, practicing courage, training ourselves in kindness, exercising gentleness, working at mercy and generosity. It's a fulltime job, and a way of life.

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<sup>2</sup> "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone", JK Rowling.

Perhaps it was on Palm Sunday that the church was truly born ... not in wind and fire ... but in courage and in conviction. Born in the willingness to follow the little parade of misfits and outcasts instead of marching to the drumbeats of war. Today is the day the church found its feet and its voice and swore allegiance to the Prince of Peace.

May that church be born again... in me and in you.

For Christ's sake, let's show the world what God's love looks like. Amen.