

From Power Over to Power With

Scriptures: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 19:28-40; Luke 22:24-30; Philippians 2:5-11

Welcome to worship on this “difficult to name” Sunday.¹ It’s Palm Sunday, of course, the day we hear about Jesus riding into Jerusalem amidst shouts of blessing from a crowd. Lucia and Penny discussed this familiar story in the storytelling video.

This is also Passion Sunday, the sixth Sunday in Lent, a day that marks the beginning of Holy Week when we remember a series of events including Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, his betrayal and arrest, his appearances before religious and governmental authorities, his death and burial. The readings we heard from Isaiah and Luke relate to the passion side of this day.

We can read the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem in all four gospel accounts. Let’s review the version we find in Luke 19:28-40.

As Jesus was approaching Jerusalem, he told two of his followers to go on ahead to the next village. “As you enter it,” he said, “you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you why you are untying it, just say that the Lord needs it.”

They did what Jesus told them. Then they brought the colt to him; and after throwing their cloaks over it, they helped Jesus get on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road in front of him.

As he began the descent down from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, his large group of followers kept growing. They began to praise God joyfully and loudly for all the miracles they had seen. They said, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

Some of the religious leaders in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop, get them under control.”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, if the people were silent, then the stones would begin to shout out.”

Luke’s story contains elements we expect – Jesus riding on a young animal, enthusiastic crowds spreading their clothing in front of him, shouts of blessing, some opposition. But note what’s missing – two things we almost always equate with this event: no palm branches, in fact, no branches of any kind, and no hosannas. I guess we could call it “Clothes on a Colt” Sunday

I had difficulty finding a picture of Jesus riding into Jerusalem that didn’t have any palms in it. I settled on this black & white picture. I found two others that came pretty close. But neither one could resist including a few palms. This is Jesus’ triumphal entry, after all. It’s Palm Sunday.

On a whim, as I was considering the alternate name for this day, I googled “Clothes on a Colt Sunday.” The top results included football, guns, a car, and one of Jesus riding into Jerusalem. No matter your opinion of gun ownership, I hope a picture of a revolver on a onesie is more than a bit disturbing to you. But, actually, pictures of weapons might help us better understand what the people in the crowd were expecting.

The words of the crowd that are repeated in all four gospel accounts of this event come from Psalm 118:26.² *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD.*

¹ This sermon draws from “Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2022,” Leader: Winter 2021-2022, MennoMedia, pp. 45-46; “Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2019,” Leader: Winter 2018-19, MennoMedia, pp. 47-48; and Pulpit Fiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/palmc>.

² Scriptures are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

We've heard parts of this psalm many times.

¹ *O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!*

²¹ *I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.*

²² *The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

²³ *This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

²⁴ *This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

²⁹ *O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.*

The entire psalm was probably written for use when a king returned from a victory in battle and participated in a procession that ended in a service of thanksgiving in the temple.³

Listen to some of the verses we don't read as often.

¹⁰ *All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*

¹¹ *They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!*

¹² *They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns;*

in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

(Some translations use the words *destroy* and *defeat* instead of *cut them off*.)

¹³ *I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me.*

¹⁴ *The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.*

The king praised the Lord for giving him strength and might in battle. The Lord was the king's salvation. The Lord saved the king from defeat. The people in the crowd were familiar with this psalm. It was used in the Passover celebrations of Jesus' day, helping them to remember past victories.

The people were familiar with the images the psalm evokes. They had seen their Roman occupiers celebrate military victories and worship their emperor. In fact, it's probable that a Roman imperial procession was entering Jerusalem from the other side of the city at the same time Jesus and his exuberant band were entering it. Rome would usually send reinforcements to keep the many thousands of Passover pilgrims in check during the festival.⁴

Now these oppressed people have reason for excitement and hope. Here is Jesus, riding into Jerusalem, his mount adorned with the royal symbols of cloaks, and an "instant-made" highway of colorful clothing welcoming the king. Surely this is the Christ, the anointed one, the long-awaited Messiah. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord," they shout.

But some aspects of the scene are out of sync with the usual practice. Why a young colt and not a large war-horse? Where are the soldiers? Where are the weapons? This person coming into Jerusalem may be a king, but this isn't the king they expect. This is a different Messiah than what many of Jesus' followers have anticipated. Jesus doesn't meet the expectations of the people wanting a violent political revolution. Jesus doesn't even meet the expectations of the people wanting a non-violent overthrow of the government.

As the story continues, the crowd who cheers is replaced by a crowd who jeers. There are certainly some, maybe many, people who do both the cheering and the jeering. The joyful shouts proclaiming Jesus as king are twisted into cries of accusation, contempt, and mocking.

The people don't understand that the power of the Lord they believe is demonstrated through military victory will be expressed much differently through Jesus, the Prince of Peace.⁵ But when Luke writes his account of Jesus' life, he highlights this aspect of who Jesus is. In his version of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, Luke intentionally leaves out the palms, cut branches, and Hosannas. These are symbols of nationalism. He states that the king who is coming is calling for peace, not for rebellion.

Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus the Messiah is the Prince of Peace. And as events continue to unfold, as the joyful shouts become cries of contempt, in the midst of cruelty and anguish,

³ Information on Psalm 118 comes from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year C* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 167.

⁴ [Holy Week: Palm Sunday - The Marcus J Borg Foundation](#)

⁵ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/palmc>

Jesus remains grounded in the power of the steadfast love of God, which sustains him and endures forever. He knows who he is and what he is about. The people are somewhat confused.

Part of being human is dealing with questions of identity.⁶ Sometimes we struggle with descriptions that other people try to place on us. In Isaiah 50:4-9, the speaker affirms his identity as a prophet. He knows he's been called and instructed by God. He's using the gifts God gave him to help other people. But those around him think he's a phony. They beat him, insult him, and spit on him. As he lives out his prophetic identity, he suffers mockery and abuse. God gives him the strength to withstand the insults and not fight back.

Jesus relies on that same strength and power. During the week leading up to his death, Jesus acknowledges that he is king, a king who comes in peace with a compassionate, humble power. Some people were looking to him to be a king who would have power over everyone and everything, power to make the circumstances of Roman occupation go away. God's way of power is to empower with love.

The events of Jesus' last week on earth are recorded in Luke 22 and 23. These two chapters take us from the Last Supper to the death of Jesus. They include a dispute among the disciples about who is the greatest. Even those closest to Jesus haven't completely grasped the idea that their spiritual power doesn't come through position and status in the world, but through their relationships with Jesus and with each other. The power of God's love is transformative, not hierarchical. Being on the way with Christ is the source of this power.

The apostle Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Philippians. In verses 5-11 of Philippians 2, Paul quotes an early Christian hymn in honor of Christ.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This is what the steadfast love and power of the Lord looks like when expressed through Jesus. As we seek God's way, we move from an understanding of power that grasps for control over others to an understanding that true power comes from working with and for others in love.

This is at the heart of the resolution I introduced last Sunday. "For Justice in the U.S. Criminal Legal System"⁷ states that: *As a historic peace church, Mennonite Church USA is called to resist "injustice in all forms, and in all places." Many aspects of the current United States' criminal legal system cause pain and suffering for many, especially poor people and people of color.*

The resolution calls us as a church body to *"commit to confronting the injustice within the current U.S. criminal legal system. There are many ways individual congregations, conferences, institutions and agencies of the denomination can participate."*

Suggestions for starting to work on this include: learning about the injustices of the criminal legal system, speaking with someone whom the legal system has harmed, supporting families of those who have been incarcerated, learning how our legal system has been shaped by racist assumptions, divesting from private prisons, advocating for the end of cash bail, advocating for policies to reduce police violence, advocating for the end of mandatory minimum sentencing, calling for a ban on the death penalty, working for reform of the criminal legal system, and seeking alternatives to the current system.

A list like this can elicit a variety of responses, many of them beginning with the words "Yes, but..." or "But what about ...". Yes, but our congregation can't do all of that, especially given all the other

⁶ This sermon contains ideas adapted from "Pondering the Word: Becoming Human," by Joanna Harader, *Leader*, Winter 2010/11, Faith and Life Resources (MennoMedia) pp. 28-30.

⁷ [MC-USA-For-Justice-Resolution-FINAL.pdf \(mennoniteusa.org\)](#)

issues and causes we're supposed to be learning about, reforming, repenting of, or advocating for. This is true. But we can do something.

But what about the people who need to be incarcerated because they've committed heinous crimes and are a danger to society. Yes, some people need to be in jail or prison, but their experience with the criminal justice system and subsequent punishment should be based on what they have done, not be heavily influenced by their income, race, or ethnicity.

But what about the police? Aren't there good officers? Don't blue lives matter? Yes, there are and, yes, they do. But the ones who don't treat people equally and use violence as a first, rather than a last resort need to be retrained or removed from their jobs. Think of the pattern of racism and disdain for people shot by police that surfaced recently in private messages between a small group of Wichita-area law enforcement officers, including several who have shot civilians.⁸ These are not good officers. Many others are.

And one way to show that blue lives matter is to stop expanding the types of situations they're called to handle. A positive step in this direction is the pilot program set to begin soon in Saline County. Two mental health specialists will go out on calls with the Salina Police Department and the Saline County Sheriff's Office when a mental health need is suspected based upon the call into dispatch. This will help to address the interplay of mental health, public safety, and criminal justice.⁹ Putting money towards expanding programs like this instead toward expanding the police force can benefit all those involved – the police, the people they encounter, and the entire community.

These are just a few things that come to my mind as I read this resolution. I wonder what we could do to make a difference in our own attitudes or in the lives of people we know who are incarcerated or caught up in a criminal legal system that contains a scarcity of justice rather than the abundance promised in the pledge of allegiance.

This resolution and the others we've considered the past few weeks may challenge and change us. Or, perhaps, they push us too far. But it's good for us to consider them.

The story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem as reported by Luke challenged the ideas of the cheering crowd. This wasn't a radical, revolutionary entry into Jerusalem. Rather, it was the Prince of Peace coming home.

God challenged their understanding of who Jesus was here to save. This is not the new king of Israel. This king is for the whole world. In fact, Jesus is king of all of creation so even if the voices were silent, the very stones of creation would cry out.

The writer of a devotional I read this week put it this way: *The biblical passages we read today turn our assumptions about power upside down. God continually invites us to rethink worldly quests for power – which often go hand in hand with some form of violence – and instead join the true power of love, service, humility, compassion, and nonviolence. This is “power with” instead of “power over.”*¹⁰

As we seek God's way, may we move from an understanding of power that grasps for control over others to an understanding that true power comes from working with and for others in love. Amen.

⁸ [Wichita deputies, police sent racist memes of George Floyd | The Wichita Eagle \(kansas.com\)](#)

⁹ [Saline County to see mental health responders after program approved \(salina.com\)](#)

¹⁰ [From power over to power with | Advent & Lenten Devotions | Goshen College](#)