

# Seeking: Where Are You Headed?

## Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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During this season of Lent, we have explored several questions seeking our consideration. From the story of Adam and Eve in the garden listening to the serpent, and the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, we were asked,

**“Who will you listen to?”**

From the story of Abram and Sarai being asked to leave their home for a new land, and the story of the Pharisee Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus, we were asked, **“How do we begin again?”**

From the story of Moses striking a rock to provide water for complaining Israelites, and the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, we were asked, **“Will you give me a drink?”**

From the story of Jesus healing the man who was born blind after the disciples wondered whose fault it was, we were asked, **“Who sinned?”**

And from the story of Ezekiel prophesizing to the valley of dry bones, and Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, we were asked, **“Can these bones live?”**

Now today, we've heard the familiar story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, often referred to as Palm Sunday, and we are being asked, **“Where are you headed?”** This obviously indicates that there is more than one path to follow. The first sentence from our Lenten resource from A Sanctified Art, which states, “When we look deeper into the context of this story, we uncover how **two parades are occurring at once.**” We know about the palm parade, but what's the other one, which by comparison, makes Jesus' look like a non-triumphal entry into Jerusalem?

In Jesus' time of the first century, the Romans always celebrated their public leaders with magnificent fanfare whenever one of them entered a city they occupied in the name of the Empire. The tradition was for everyone to go outside the city gates to greet the Roman dignitary. There would be dancing and singing, with a welcome speech filled with flattering commendations. Then, all the people would escort the entourage back into the city for more celebration. The Roman dignitary, riding high upon a powerful warhorse, would have soldiers and horsemen before and behind him (kind of like the Secret Service).

Quoting one commentator, “Notably, the year Jesus was crucified, on a day prior to the Passover feast, Pontius Pilate [the Roman governor over the province of Judea] would have entered the city of Jerusalem in some similar way. Pilate ruled the region from the coastal city of Caesarea, and would come down to Jerusalem from time to time, especially during important events like Passover. **Pilates' presence served to remind the people that they were under Roman authority, thus quelling any idea of revolt...** And the Jewish leaders and other people who wanted to keep Rome on their side would have come out to greet Pilate and welcome him.” **Let there be no mistake, this was a highly politicized parade.**

With this brief overview of the cultural expectations in mind, we can begin to appreciate why Jesus's entry might be considered a-triumphant [non-triumphant] in comparison. The gospel writer clearly wanted to make this distinction between Jesus' entry and that made by a royal dignitary by quoting from the Old Testament Hebrew prophet Zechariah (Zech. 9:9-10), who declares:

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
 Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
 Lo, your king comes to you;  
 triumphant and victorious is he,  
 humble and riding on a donkey,  
 on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
<sup>10</sup> He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
 and the warhorse from Jerusalem;  
 and the battle-bow shall be cut off,  
 and he shall command peace to the nations;  
 his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
 and from the River to the ends of the earth.

**Matthew's point is to identify Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, not an earthly king, by arriving humbly on a donkey, thus fulfilling the prophecy that a new era has dawned.**

So, let us now return to our resource material which connects this story with our overarching Lenten theme of seeking, and the question, "**Where are you headed?**" They write:

Jesus' unconventional and unexpected entry into the city parallels the extravagant parade of Pilate, the Roman governor. As both leaders enter the city for the Passover, they embody different directions. **Pilate commands military dominance and imperial power; Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God and the way of peace.** Within the chaos and commotion of this scene, **which leader will you follow?...** In the midst of opposing forces, which way will you go?

Well, now it's time for the hard part, some of which you may find a bit controversial if you believe politics shouldn't be brought into a service of worship. **But to be clear and certain, and yes from a biblical perspective, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was political theater at its grandest.** The **Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow** is the resource biblical commentator for this week, and as I mentioned a few Sundays ago is a former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). **He approached this event not by comparing the two parades, but by two different understandings of Jesus.**

Today, let's stay at the parade, for just a moment. Because we know what comes after Palm Sunday, it is easy to quickly judge and rebuke the crowd that eventually turns on Jesus. Oh, those silly people, cheering on a triumphal entry as if he were a victor returning from war and not a human who was about to disrupt the very fabric and stability of the world, which included him dying.

The thing is, in many ways these two things were happening at the same time; **the question is which Jesus will we follow, then and now.**

I am certain that the Jesus we choose to follow has everything to do with our current state of being. If you have been struggling, feel set aside or ignored, or are experiencing powerlessness or marginalization, any glimpse of gaining back some power or security would not only be welcomed but cheered. I can only imagine that the deeper the struggle, the more vibrant the joy would be at the promise of some relief.

So again, let's be at the parade, but let's also be very clear about which Jesus we are cheering on: the militaristic victor or the humble subversive—for either could be born from pent-up frustration and struggle.

For today, this is not a true choice that I hope folks are making. In fact, **I hope that many are resisting the wave of Christian nationalism that has been the dominant Christian narrative in our political discourse. Too many are choosing the narrative of Jesus as a wartime victor and choosing a Gospel militarized against anyone who would stray from a litmus test of beliefs**—beliefs that Jesus never actually addressed and beliefs certainly not included in the commandments, that Jesus did speak to us, to love God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

**Now that second Jesus, that one who is turning over tables, challenging power, and sitting with sinners in order to heal and love, that's the one worthy of a parade.**

**There are those who are currently using Jesus not as a model of humble service, but as a means to gain power and control to lord it over others. This is wrong on so many levels.** I've even seen depictions of Jesus as some kind of Marvel superhero, muscular and holding an automatic weapon as the American flag waves in the background. So let me ask, if you were in that palm processional parade that day, **which Jesus would you, would I, would we be cheering on, and for what reasons?**

Returning back to the comparison of the two very different parades, Resource artist the Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, reflecting on the simultaneously-occurring parades of Jesus and Pontius Pilate entering Jerusalem, speaks to how each leader embodies a different version of power. She asks, **"Which parade you would join in Jerusalem has a lot to say about your definition of power.** If you are quick to place yourself in Jesus' parade, I encourage you to pause and consider these questions honestly:

- **When have you aligned yourself with systems or people who have used their power for violence [or marginalizing others] or to uphold the status quo [to maintain a position of privilege]?**
- **When have you embodied power through vulnerability and love for your neighbor?**

How would you answer these questions? Where are you headed? Welcome to Holy Week.

Amen.

Resources:

"Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith", A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.

SALT, *Commentary for Palm/Passion Sunday*, 3-27-23.

Greg Stiekes, *The A-Triumphal Entry of Jesus Into Jerusalem (Part 1)*, *Theology in 3D*, BJU Seminary, 3-20-18.