

“Power Outage”

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 29, 2026

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to recognize the signs of your work in our world, bringing light and life. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Palm Sunday is confusing. Many of you will recall that it has been one of my least favorite holidays of the Christian year. But maybe I’m coming around. Because I do like questions, and Palm Sunday raises so many questions. Who was that crowd crying “Hosanna”? Were they the same people who were shouting “Crucify him” just a few days later? Was this a triumphant entry, or a parody of imperial power, or an exercise in humility that got more attention than expected? And what’s with Matthew trying to convince us that Jesus was riding two donkeys at the same time? It’s confusing, and it seems like there are multiple different directions we could go in here.

But let’s start with those double donkeys, because something is happening there that can help us avoid similar traps. Matthew is well known for his desire to show, at every available opportunity, how Jesus is fulfilling the words of the Hebrew prophets. And here he is quoting the prophet Zechariah. Well, he’s almost quoting Zechariah. If you flip to page 884 in the Old Testament section of those pew Bibles, you can see how Zechariah put it: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.” It’s not a donkey AND a

colt; it's a donkey that is a colt, that is, a young donkey. But Matthew, in his zeal to further his agenda of proving Jesus is the Messiah, grasps hold of it too quickly and ends up giving us something that actually makes it harder to believe.

And in some ways, this is just a tiny reflection of what we've done with Palm Sunday more broadly. Instead of absorbing it slowly and reflectively, we've grabbed hold of it a little too enthusiastically and gone to town with the drama of the whole thing. We've turned it into something fit for a children's pageant, because quite frankly, we prefer children's pageants over parodies full of foreboding.

It is confusing. It does seem as though there are multiple directions we could go here. But in reality, there is just one direction, and it's the one that unfolds when we follow Jesus: deeper in. He'd been telling the disciples for weeks that he was going to Jerusalem to his death. But it seems that they, too, would have been fine with just holding a parade. Perhaps some of the confusion here lies in the conflict between Jesus following his destiny and the disciples' and the crowd's longing for deliverance they could recognize.

There is no doubt that this crowd was desperate. We think of "Hosanna" as a word of praise, but it's really a word of plea. "Save us!" is something you cry out when it seems all is lost. They had had enough of the kings who lorded power over them, bleeding them dry with imperial taxes and oppressive violence. They were ready for a new kind of king, and here is this guy who was known for healing the sick and bringing

sight to the blind. Did you hear how he fed all those people? Did you hear about that fellow whom he made able to walk? I heard he raised Lazarus from the dead! That's the kind of king this crowd was looking for. If anyone could come in and throw off the brutal yoke of the Romans, surely it must be him!

And yet, there's that donkey. Whether there was one donkey, or somehow two, we can't forget about the donkey. Because the donkey was the biggest clue to how the week is going to play out. Sure, Zechariah said the king was coming triumphant and victorious. But he also said he was coming humbly, on a donkey – the humblest of donkeys in fact.

Palm Sunday is confusing; disorienting, you might even say. It's like when the lights blink a few times, but so quickly that you're not sure what happened. Was it really the power going out, or did you just blink weird? But then later you look at the clock on the microwave, and you realize it really happened. Palm Sunday is like the power blinking off and on. And even if the crowd didn't fully comprehend what was happening, the power system did. Those who were in power noticed the disruption, and they knew it was a bad sign – for them anyway.

It could be that thinking of Palm Sunday as a power disruption is the best way to explain it. It was clearly received as a threat to those who were wielding power. And that donkey is a major clue that Jesus was wielding power in a whole new way. In that sense, it's a book-end to this season of Lent, which began with Jesus in the wilderness,

being tempted by the devil with all sorts of earthly powers and rejecting them one after the other.

It's not that Jesus didn't have power or didn't use his power. Just a breath later, the way Matthew tells the story, he's in the temple, throwing out the money changers. But king? Only if you're willing to stretch the word well past the breaking point of meaning. So much of the violence being done to our faith at this point in history is wrapped up in people painting Jesus as a victorious conqueror, in direct contrast to what the witness of this holy week is trying to show us. Jesus didn't grasp power; he transformed it. He played with it and mocked it. He shared it and reflected it back. He claimed power only inasmuch as it would submit to love.

Anyone trying to tell you that God's power is wielded by the mighty, through the ways of violence or oppression has never met Jesus. Anyone saying that God is calling us to do anything to our enemies other than love them is serving someone other than Christ. Palm Sunday is confusing and disorienting, but it might also be revealing. Perhaps it's not just the power flickering, but also like that moment in a police procedural when they turn off the overhead light and turn on the blacklight, to reveal the evidence of the violence that has been perpetrated. Palm Sunday arrives to remind us of how badly power is distributed in the structures and systems that shape our lives. The donkeys are there to make clear that Jesus' power works differently; Jesus' power is rooted in humility and compassion, the willingness to suffer with us.

Sometimes a moment of confusion can be an opportunity. If the way things were is suddenly revealed to not make as much sense as previously presumed, it pushes us to imagine how things could be instead. What if power weren't used to oppress and extract? What if all people were invited to take part in shaping the way the world works? What if we used our power to save one another? What if religion really were rooted in love and humility, rather than power structures intent on keeping "us" in and "them" out?

There are a lot of things that will never be clear about Palm Sunday. I would prefer to believe that this crowd enthusiastically crying "Hosanna!" is a different group of people than the ones shouting "Crucify!" five days later. That gives me more hope than considering that maybe they felt betrayed when Jesus did not, in fact, overthrow the Romans but instead allowed himself to get thrown in jail alongside common thieves. Maybe it's a little bit of both. Maybe this parade was a triumphal entry and a parody of imperial power and an exercise in humility. Maybe it's okay that it's a little confusing and a little mysterious. Because it's just the beginning, the beginning of a holy week when the stakes will get higher and higher and the truth will become clearer and clearer. There are a lot of directions we could go from here, but let's follow the path that Jesus is taking, deeper in. Amen.