



Palm Sunday
29 March 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

My wife and I have always been intrigued by the Roomba – you know the UFO looking, flat circle robotic vacuum that cleans your floors while you work or sleep. It always seemed to be a first-world problem, you know actually using a vacuum and cleaning the carpets and wood floors yourself. But when my wife received a gift card at work – we realized we had almost enough for an off-brand robotic vacuum. And while we debated the purchase as husband and wife, wouldn't you know that I came home one day to a new robotic vacuum charging in one corner of our house. Once you plug the vacuum into the wall to charge, you had to connect the vacuum to your cell phone and set it up. First – we had to name the vacuum. My wife settled on "Clean Latifah." And then you had to tell it to map your house – room by room, chair by chair, corner by corner until the vacuum learned the layout of the house. The first time we told it to clean, much to the annoyance of our golden retriever Baxter, every time Baxter found a spot to lay down – the vacuum would come right behind him causing the dog to get up and move. I have to admit, Clean Latifah, the robot vacuum, does a pretty good job. The first couple of times – we set her to her cleaning while we were awake. When we trusted her not to communicate with Alexa or the dishwasher to try and take over the house, we scheduled her to clean at night while we slept. A perfect arrangement – go to sleep – house is vacuumed – wake up to clean floors. Until last week, when in the middle of the night, my wife's cell phone alerted us to a message. When she checked her phone, my wife read the following message: "Please help Clean Latifah as she is on the edge of a cliff." Well, knowing there are no cliffs in our home, the cliff turned out to be a cord the robotic vacuum could not navigate, but nevertheless I smiled as I realized Clean Latifah has just provided me with the opening of my sermon for today.

Jesus, too, finds himself on a cliff – though, this one he has chosen all on his own. Jesus knows all the streets of the city – the marbled walls of the religious leaders and the humble homes of the poor. He knows the layout of the city – from corner to gate and the pools from Siloam to Bethesda. He knows the tricks and the traps of those who want him disappeared. Yes, Jesus, finds himself on a cliff – though, this one is of his own making. It is Palm Sunday - the day we remember the entrance of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem – the honored "city of peace" though peace is often absent once you pass through the city gates. Jesus has caused quite a stir in the whispered stories entering the city. With every pilgrim comes an opinion – there is hope – there is despair – there is wild optimism that this will be the year that the empire will be overthrown by the Messiah and abundant fear that the people of God will be left wanting deliverance and salvation yet again, when the chosen one of God leaves them to suffer another Passover engulfed in the oppression of an occupation.

Every year during Passover – the Jewish festival that swells Jerusalem's population from its usual 50,000 to at least 200,000 – the Roman governor rides up to Jerusalem from his coastal residence in the west. He comes in all of his imperial majesty to remind the Jewish pilgrims that Rome demands their loyalty, obedience, and submission. The Jewish people can commemorate their ancient victory over Egypt if they want to. But if they try any real time resistance, they will be obliterated. Now picture the scene, as Pilate clangs and crashes his imperial way into Jerusalem from the west, Jesus approaches from the east, looking ragtag and absurd. Unlike the Roman emperor and his legions, who rule by force, coercion, and terror, Jesus comes defenseless and weaponless into his kingship. Riding on a donkey, he declares without words that his rule will have nothing to recommend it but love, humility, long-suffering, and sacrifice. Both processions will be honored with waving palm branches marking royalty, and colorful cloaks over rocky roads to offer worship, but only one procession will hear the word "hosanna" carried on the wind. "Hosanna" – "save us." "Save now."

Last week we received the news that a member of our church lost their asylum case and will self-deport in the coming days. The grief is almost too much to bear these days. We pray for God's care while we struggle



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to understand the wisdom behind God's answer to our prayers. Especially when the answers seem so far from what we pleaded with God to provide. So often, I think I know exactly what kind of Savior I need. The savior of the swift repair, the majestic intervention, the tangible presence, the pillow soft landing. But that savior is not Jesus. What I sometimes want, in my prayers, is the mighty Jesus – the one who brings the quick fix and the miracle. What I often find in the answers to my prayers are the often chaotic and somewhat disturbing “now and not yet” replies and the “you can't understand right now” resolutions. The kind of Savior I want and the kind of Savior I need are often in conflict with each other – yet the Savior who dies on the cross and rises from the dead are one in the same in my heart if not always in my faithfulness.

There were two ways into the city. Two winds moving through the same streets. Two gospels already being believed. From the West – empire. Boots on stone. Iron catching light. Horses restless for violence, their bodies remembering what they were trained to do. Standards lifted – bright, unquestioned. Carried like certainty. A kingdom fluent in power, calling it peace. A kingdom drenched in blood, calling it righteousness. A kingdom that names God without fear of God.

And from the East – no army. Just a man on a borrowed donkey. Dust on his feet. Breath in his lungs. No performance. No defense. Just presence. Mercy. God refusing to become violence. God does not ride above the earth – God walks it. Each step, a kind of refusal. God does not command destruction from a distance. God comes close instead. Close enough to be wounded. Close enough to be killed. They shout, Hosanna. Save us. But salvation bends to whatever we're hungry for. Some want safety. Some want revenge. Some want control – just with God's name stamped on it. And here – something tears. Because there is always a way to take the name of Christ and make it useful. Lay it across the back of a warhorse. Call domination discipleship. The cross lifted to protect the self. You can still see it – in rooms where power is performed, in Bibles held high while the way of Jesus is quietly set aside. There were two processions on this Palm Sunday. Power confused with glory. This is the lie that keeps coming back – that God belongs to the strong, that if you win, you must be right, that might is somehow blessing. But Jesus will not ride with Rome or the religious leaders. He does not climb onto the white horse.

Jesus chooses the donkey. Small. Unarmed. Nothing impressive about it. A kingdom that cannot be enforced. A kingdom that won't defend itself the way we expect. A kingdom that would rather suffer than become the thing it hates. And still—we hover in between. Palms in our hands. Expectations in our bones. We were told to look for a lion. Something strong. Unstoppable. Something to deal with our enemies. But what we see at the gates is a lamb. Wounded. Quiet. Standing there as though it has already been slain. And if we're honest— we don't quite know what to do with that. And when Jesus does not— when Jesus refuses to dominate, to silence, to win— something shifts. Not loud. You could miss it. But it's there. Disappointment. A crack running through belief. Because when love won't take control— we start looking for something that will.

The palms loosen. The songs thin out. And somewhere between hope and outcome – pieces of silver begin to speak. Because the sound of coin is strong. The promise of victory – certain. Too easy to trust. It offers clarity. Victory. A god we can manage. But the donkey – and its rider – it just keeps going through the gates and into the city. Into misunderstanding. Into rejection. Into the slow, stubborn work of love. Into a cross that takes the violence and does not give it back. And we - we are still there. We have always been there. Between the white horse and the donkey. Between the flag and the cross. Between the Christ we talk about and the Christ in front of us. Which one will lead you to follow this day into the holy city?



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People of God, as we stand with palm branches in hand, this is the moment. What parade do we watch? Who do we wait to see? What will we say? What song will be sung? What choice will we make when the cost is so dear? When Jesus asks us to take up our cross – will we lay down our sword? Not as an idea— as a way of living. Because one way crucifies— it always has. The other...gets crucified. And only one shows you what God is like. Only one remakes the world without becoming its violence. Only one walks through death and still calls it life. Only one is the way of Jesus.

Hear the words of Psalm 118 again: Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord, they who are righteous may enter through it. We hear these words today on this Palm Sunday. Each of us will hear them again at the graveside of each person we love who leaves this life for the promise of new life in the Kingdom of God. And one day, someone we love, will hear those words read for each of us at our open graves. Yes, my friends, the Kingdom of God has come near this day. So near to us, that we can almost touch the neck of the donkey as the Savior passes by. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Save now! Holy God, save us from the cliff – save us from ourselves. Thanks be to God – Jesus, you already have. Amen.