

fitting that the last thing they spoke was this demand to stop calling out to Jesus. It turned out they were the ones who went silent. Jesus responded to them that if the people were quiet, even the stones would cry out. I don't think Jesus was looking for an ego boost. He wanted people who stood on the side of God to have the courage to declare their allegiance, and then to live it. How he surely wished his friends would be courageous enough to stand with him and keep speaking up at his arrest, at the cross. But if we believe what Jesus said, then even when our courage fails, Christ's mission and kingship will not fail. He is not like those warlord kings who rise and fall with their armies. His mission of love and justice will always win out. And if somehow, we fall silent, God's truths will emerge in creation itself.

At the end of the passage, Jesus finally made it into the city of Jerusalem. But once he was there, he didn't make a sacrifice or make a show of his own power. He wept over the city. He lamented that they could not see what makes for peace; they could not recognize Jesus himself as God among them. We know there will be much to weep about this week: in the Bible stories we read of Jesus' arrest and death, and certainly also in the world we live in. We still cannot figure out what makes for peace. But even as we struggle, we can continue to sing, to shout, to use our voices to declare who is king in our lives. Maybe it sounds like that psalm the crowds shouted. Or maybe it sounds:

Like the wife who, every night, reminds her husband, whose memory is slipping, of the words from another psalm: the Lord is my shepherd. You are God's child.

Like the friends who sing hymns together while one lives out their days on hospice.

Like the retirees who go to a rally to speak up for justice in these days of turmoil.

Like the confirmation student who notices God's presence in the world, and dares to remark upon it, whether that makes them popular or not.

Like the child who speaks up for what's right even in the face of a bully because they know God who teaches them to be honest and loving and kind.

Friends, keep singing; and speaking and acting. Continue to declare that Jesus, and only he, is the king who has come in the name of the Lord. He is humble and riding on a donkey. He will be crucified and die. Yet he rose again and reigns in highest heaven. And so we cannot be silent. We must be witnesses to Christ's lordship today, and this week, and every day.

All glory and honor thanks and praise be to God.



April 13, 2025

Palm Sunday

*"Blessed is the King"*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 19:29-44

**M**aking an entrance is a way to make a statement. It says who you are and signals what's happening. From red carpet award ceremonies, to sports teams racing onto the field through smoke and fireworks, to the parade that welcomes Santa Claus to town, we are familiar with the trappings of big entrances. We know what they symbolize without the need for any commentary or explanation.

The same was true when Jesus made his entrance into Jerusalem. To the people who participated and watched it, the meaning of these events was both obvious and consequential. But because of our distance from that time, we have to decode the symbols and events to understand what Jesus's entrance meant then and means for us now.

Jesus went to a lot of trouble to organize his entrance into the city. He was not creating a new ritual; he was both emulating and diverging from the triumphal entries he had seen and knew about. In that time and long before, when conquerors claimed a city, they would enter into its gates through a procession. Roman generals returning from victory would come showing off the spoils of war accompanied by thousands of captives, destined to become slaves. The victor rode on a chariot and wore a crown of laurel branches. All along the way, citizens would line the route and shout out to acclaim the great ruler. Jesus' parade signalled all these things, while he also shifted their meaning: instead of a chariot, he rode a donkey. Instead of laurel branches, he would soon wear a crown of thorns.

The people played an important role in the procession, too. They knew their part, just as Jesus did. They laid down their cloaks to make the ancient version of a red carpet. And they shouted and waved and praised Jesus. The people welcomed him using the words of psalm 118: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Only the way Luke wrote it, they said "Blessed is the King." They meant that word, king. They were anticipating someone much more like that ruler in a chariot; someone to throw off the yoke of Rome to

1 Joe Richman, "Radio Diaries," March 6, 2025, Radiotopia

get rid of a terrible ruler and an empire who took advantage of them. They were looking for a savior. And they were going to get one, just in a different way than they expected.

The people calling out to Jesus as *king* was no small thing. Because in that time and place, the Roman Emperor was the king. To call Jesus king was a theological truth and an embodied hope. But it was also to deprive the Emperor of his supposed title and all that came with it. There was no freedom of speech there. So to use the words of the psalm in that way was dangerous; inflammatory. Rome would be happy to put down, with violence, any threat to the emperor's rule, as the coming crucifixion will prove. The implications of Jesus' entrance may have started as matters of the heart, as the crowd asked themselves 'who shall be king and ruler of my life? Of our lives?' But the answers to those questions were not a private, spiritual matter. What Jesus was doing and what the people were shouting had major, public implications.

The Pharisees knew this. As soon as they heard people addressing Jesus as king, they shouted something very different to Jesus: "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." They said it plainly: *stop*. They knew that in this environment, calling Jesus king would be unacceptable. This was the time of Passover when thousands of Jewish pilgrims came to the city. Tensions between religious institutions and the empire were high. Things could explode at any moment. This parade that challenged the status quo and these words were all too risky. They thought it was better to keep quiet, not to poke the empirical bear.

"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord" was what the people shouted and sang. It was what made the religious leaders tell them to shut up. Are there ways in which that is still a dangerous statement, or perhaps is once again? Are we prepared to stand up and shout that Jesus is king, that Jesus' way rules our lives—not the stock market, not any governmental authority, and not even our devotion to family or team or tribe? When the world around us diverges from the values of Jesus, we have to get in touch with our hearts again, to make the important choice: blessed is the king who comes on a war horse, or blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord? Will we keep singing the psalm and keep declaring, as the angels did at Jesus' birth, "peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven?" Or will we stop saying it, like the Pharisees demanded? Or maybe worse, stop living it? What is at stake if we do?

Dorothy Thompson was a much respected foreign news correspondent in Germany leading up to World War II. She tried to warn the world about what she saw coming, but the Gestapo eventually expelled her from Germany.

When she returned home, she was constantly on the airwaves rallying Americans toward stronger opposition to fascism around the world.

Having witnessed the murder of Jews in Europe, Thompson was an early and devoted advocate for the creation of the state of Israel, a movement called Zionism. She cared deeply for the rights and freedom of persecuted people. But in 1945, she traveled to the Holy Land as the state of Israel was being established. When she got there, as one reporter says, "She saw nothing but internment camps, refugees of the Palestinian population being forced off their own land and put into other lands that had been designated for them. It reminded her of the kind of hatred and violence that she had seen in Germany."<sup>1</sup> Back in the U.S., Thompson made clear that the situation would not result in equal rights for all the citizens and that it was perhaps a recipe for perpetual war.

Sharing these ethical concerns made Thompson incredibly unpopular. She lost her job at the *New York Post*. She was accused of being anti-Semitic even though she had worked hard to raise awareness about the atrocities being done to Jews throughout the war. Thompson never regained the kind of steady work and respect she had previously found. Yet she also did not stop speaking up. Thompson declared what ruled her life: a commitment to care, wholeness, and freedom for people, believing that all races and religions could live in peace. It was, in some ways, dangerous to keep on speaking and living that commitment. But she chose to stick to it, even though she paid a price.

Today our confirmants stood before us, and together, we all professed what we believe: that Jesus Christ is savior and Lord of our lives. That we renounce evil and its power in the world. We bound ourselves, once again, to the Lord of Love; to the Prince of Peace. We raised our voices again to say that *this* is the story we choose to live in, God's values are the ones we profess, God's love is the kind of love we will give, come what may. As the students and many of you know, it is no small thing to use your voice to speak these things. And they also know that these words become meaningful when they inform how we actually live. When they help us make decisions about how we use our time and what we do with our money, how we care for others and what we are willing to risk in order to do that. Whether we're in 7th grade or college, making decisions about the future or care giving for family members, we all have ways to speak with our voices and our lives that Jesus is king. We have ways to do that in our own lives, and also ways to do that which impact the public sphere around us.

The Pharisees don't appear after this moment in Luke's gospel. It seems