

“‘Ix-Nay’ on the ‘Ing-Kay’”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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Scripture Reading: Luke 19:29-40

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”



Sermon: “‘Ix-Nay’ ON the ‘Ing-Kay’”

Today is Palm Sunday. We are just one week from Easter, the resurrection of Jesus; a day of glory and celebration; the biggest day in the church year!

Between Palm Sunday and Easter, a lot of things will happen in the Jesus story. Some traditions spend a lot of time during this coming week remembering and telling those stories. Some churches will worship every night this week. Some will observe Maundy Thursday and Good Friday with worship services. Some will walk the stations of the cross or reenact the passion of Jesus on Good Friday.

We will worship on the evening of Maundy Thursday, but short of that, we don’t do much else in the way of formal observance during this week. And that is probably to our detriment. Because what tends to happen is that we come in here Palm Sunday and wave our palm fronds and celebrate Jesus’ “Triumphal Entry” into Jerusalem and then next week we’ll put on our new Easter outfits and sing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” as we celebrate his resurrection. We go so fast from one Sunday to the next, that we miss the importance of everything that happens in-between.

We’ll remember his arrest, and trial, and suffering on the cross - and that it was unjust. We’ll remember that his own people betrayed him and that his friends abandoned him to die alone. But then on Easter, the tomb will be empty, and we will celebrate that God is more powerful than the powers and principalities of this world!

And it will be comforting because in the resurrection, we receive the good news of eternal life and of God’s great love for humanity – but, that is all next week. When we spend some time reading and thinking about what happens between Palm Sunday and Easter, we realize that this week is really about something else. It’s about challenge. It’s about the difficulty of being a disciple. It’s about standing-up to controlling powers and principalities and declaring exactly where your allegiance lies.

You see, the church typically describes Jesus as innocent. The charges against him, made by the Jewish authorities, were bogus. Jesus was the sinless Lamb of God that is sacrificed for the sins of the world. That was certainly Paul’s theology. And while I won’t dispute that, I will say that while Jesus was sinless, he wasn’t innocent.

It is interesting that we come with such joy to this day of worship. Our tradition has cast this day as a “win” for Jesus. Even calling his procession into Jerusalem “triumphant.” We walk in here waving palm fronds as though we were cheering and welcoming the Buckeyes down at the Horseshoe.

But what we tend to forget is that Jesus wasn’t riding into his own home stadium. Yes, there were crowds gathered to welcome him, but Jerusalem was definitely a hostile environment for both he and his followers. Jerusalem was a road game. And when you’re on the road, you show respect for the other team. Remember how fired-up people got when Baker Mayfield planted the Oklahoma flag in the middle of the Block O after they beat OSU here in 2017?¹ Remember that? Yeah, On Palm Sunday Jesus plants his flag right in the middle of Jerusalem. And the home-town fans ain’t happy about it.

Now, if you're interested in self-preservation, there are better ways to enter a hostile environment than at the front of a parade. Consider the U.S. President. When the President visits troops serving in a war zone overseas like Iraq or Afghanistan, security is tight. Those trips are top secret. They're not even announced until the President has already arrived and is safe on the ground.²

And celebrities, when they travel will often take steps to keep a low profile, like wearing disguises or clothes that help them blend in with the crowds. When celebrities stay in hotels or reserve a table at a restaurant, they will often use a pseudonym. Actor Brad Pitt was known at one time to check into hotels under the name "Bryce Pilaf." Justin Timberlake used the name "Mr. Woodpond." (Get it? Timber Lake, Wood Pond?) In a nod to "A Street Car Named Desire," John Bon Jovi often uses the name "Stanley Kowalski." And in an odd twist, actor George Clooney has been known to check into hotels under the name "Arnold Schwarzenegger."³

But Jesus takes none of those precautions. He has no interest in keeping a low profile. Quite to the contrary, his actions this day are designed to not only draw attention to himself, but to make a theological point.

The Old Testament prophet Zechariah 9:9 says this:

⁹Rejoice 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.

The scene as Jesus rides into Jerusalem appears to closely match Zachariah's prophecy. And remember too, that a King coming in peace rides not a horse, but a donkey. So, when Jesus sends his disciples to round up the donkey, and then rides that donkey into Jerusalem, he is fulfilling these prophetic words of Zechariah.

He rides into Jerusalem, the City of David, the traditional capital of Israel and the seat of Roman authority in the region, and as Jesus rides, his followers and the people who line the parade route start throwing their cloaks down on the ground, and Luke tells us that the multitude of disciples were shouting "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!".

Jesus is not trying to keep a low profile. By his actions and those of his followers, he is openly declaring who he is and what he represents. Which is not the best approach if one is trying to minimize one's chances of angering the authorities.

Luke then tells us that some of the Pharisees encourage Jesus to silence his supporters. "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." We assume they are offended by what is being said. Calling Jesus a King coming in the name of the Lord is blasphemous. And since the Pharisees have a generally negative vibe in the gospels and have accused Jesus of blasphemy and have conspired against him before, it is easy to believe these Pharisees also just want Jesus and his supporters to stop shouting blasphemous things.

But there is another possibility. Remember that back in Chapter 13, Luke tells us that some Pharisees came to warn Jesus that Herod wants to find him and kill him – ⁴ we read that here in worship four weeks ago.

And the gospel of John tells us about Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee that came to Jesus by night to learn from him. John tells us that Nicodemus was "a leader of the Jews" and that he told Jesus "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."⁵

So, maybe not all the Pharisees are against Jesus. Maybe these are friends of Jesus or silent supporters who recognize the danger inherent in what he is doing and what his disciples are saying. Maybe they're not trying to silence the opposition. Maybe they just want Jesus' disciples to shut-up so they don't get Jesus into any more trouble than he's already in. Maybe this is Jesus' friends saying "Shhh... keep it down! 'Ix nay' on the 'Ing-Kay'".

But as the Pharisees plead with him to silence his disciples, Jesus replies "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." The truth of Jesus' identity can't be silenced because it is born by the whole of the creation itself. In a place and time where proclaiming yourself King got you executed, Jesus shows no interest in keeping his identity a secret. He makes no attempt to fly under the radar. In fact, Jesus is practically thumbing his nose at those who believe themselves to be in authority. This is an "in your face" act of defiance. He is planting his flag.

Which is interesting, because tradition holds that Jesus was innocent of the charges against him. When the Jewish authorities bring him to Pilate, Luke tells us they bring three charges against Jesus: "...perverting [the] nation, forbidding

us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”⁶ Those first two charges are bogus. But there’s something to that last one. And we’ve just seen it in Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem.

When Jesus is taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor in the area, the charge that draws Pilate’s attention is the last one. By claiming to be King, Jesus would face charges of treason and sedition. Claiming to be King is a threat to the legal authority of the emperor of Rome and his government. When Pilate sentences Jesus to be crucified, that is the charge he has inscribed on a sign above his head: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” In Caesar’s Rome, any “king” not named “Caesar” was asking for a death sentence.

Now Luke describes Pilate as angst-ridden and torn-up about this innocent man who has been brought before him. Luke even describes Herod, who we know to be the vicious ruler who had John the Baptist beheaded because he criticized Herod’s marriage to his brother’s wife⁷, as a benign character who mocks Jesus, but takes no action against him. But we know who Herod is and we know that Herod already wanted to kill Jesus six chapters ago!

Historians record that Pilate was no softy either. He was not indecisive. He was no fan of the Jews and he was not particularly sympathetic to rabble rousers and people who were brought before him. Reza Aslan, author of the 2013 book *Zealot* notes that historians of the time were harsh in their descriptions of Pilate:

“[S]ources describe him as cruel, cold-hearted, and rigid: a proudly imperious Roman with little regard for the sensitivities of subject people . . . “The gospels present Pilate as a righteous yet weak-willed man so overcome with doubt about putting Jesus to death that he does everything in his power to save his life, finally washing his hands of the entire episode when the Jews demand his blood.”

But, Aslan continues:

“That is pure fiction. What Pilate was best known for was his extreme depravity, his total disregard for Jewish law and tradition and his barely concealed aversion to the Jewish nation as a whole.”⁸

The Roman historian Josephus recounts an incident where Pilate took money from the Temple Treasury and used it to build an aqueduct. Not only did he desecrate the temple by using sacred money for secular purposes, but he allowed the aqueduct to be built through a cemetery, thus rendering the waters it carried ritually impure.⁹ When crowds of Jews turned out into the streets to protest, Pilate had them beaten with clubs, with a high number of fatalities.¹⁰

It’s worth remembering that the gospels were written several decades after the events they describe and they were written largely, not for Jewish audiences, but for Christian converts. Luke, particularly, writes for a largely Roman audience. It is in his best interest to couch the story in terms that are more friendly to Roman history and thereby shift the blame to Jewish authorities.

But no matter what, Jesus is charged with being a king, the Messiah of the Jews. And of that charge he *is* guilty. He *is* guilty of being the Messiah. He *is* guilty of being a King. He *is* guilty of being a living threat to the power and authority of Rome. If he were not, why would we be here today?

Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was not only coming, but that it was already present in him. This was no spiritual “pie-in-the-sky”. The Kingdom of God is real and Jesus repeatedly described God’s Kingdom as overturning the way the world is.

Remember, this is the Jesus who proclaimed blessings on the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated, reviled, and defamed on account of the Son of Man while at the same time calling woe to the rich, to those who are full, to those who laugh and to those of whom others speak well.¹¹

Jesus taught that in the Kingdom of God we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.¹² He held up the hated Samaritan as a hero.¹³ He taught his followers that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”¹⁴ and that “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”¹⁵

While Jesus had no intention of leading an armed revolt and taking the throne by force, he did enter Jerusalem as a herald of the coming Kingdom of God; a Kingdom that would turn the world as we know it, upside down. Rome had every reason to feel threatened by that. Because sometimes, being a good Christian means being a bad Roman.

So then, what does it mean to stand and wave these palms in celebration of Jesus as our King? What does it mean for us to call him King and to walk beside him as he faces the powers and principalities that stand in opposition to God's Kingdom?

Our society has gotten comfortable with the idea of Jesus as King because we've made that idea co-exist so nicely with our other allegiances and loyalties. Our ideas of Jesus as King take a back seat at the right times so as not to make too many waves. But what if that were different? What if we took seriously, every day, the proclamation we make this day, that Jesus is King?

At heart, it would be an act of treason. It *should be* an act of treason. We are proclaiming a loyalty that is higher than any other. To stand with Jesus - to call him "King" - means honoring and obeying him first. It means when loyalty to any other entity comes into conflict with our loyalty to Jesus, we follow Jesus.

Next Sunday is Easter and that will be a day of comfort when we consider our salvation and the impact of God's grace in our own lives. But today . . . well, today is different. Today is a day of challenge when we consider what it means to proclaim Jesus as our King in a world that doesn't always understand the fullness of what those words mean. It means to take-up our own crosses and follow Jesus, every day.

And sometimes, it means being a bad Roman.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Tim Bielik, Cleveland. com. "Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield plants OU flag at Ohio State logo after 31-16 win vs. Buckeyes." cleveland.com, 10 Sept. 2017, www.cleveland.com/osu/2017/09/oklahoma_quarterback_baker_may.html.

² "Obama Travels To Iraq For First Visit As President." NPR.org, 7 Apr. 2009, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102827828.

³ Leisure, Travel +. "Here are the fake names celebrities use at hotels." INSIDER, 21 June 2017, www.thisisinsider.com/fake-names-celebrities-use-2017-6.

⁴ Luke 13:31-35, NRSV

⁵ John 3:1-21, NRSV

⁶ Luke 23:1-2, NRSV

⁷ Bond, Helen K. "Herod, Family." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, Abingdon Press, 2007, p. 809.

⁸ "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth." *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, by Reza Aslan, Random House, 2013, pp. 46–47.

⁹ Schwartz, Daniel R. "Pontius Pilate." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, Doubleday, 1992, p. 399.

¹⁰ Bond, Helen K. "Pilate, Pontius." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 526.

¹¹ Luke 6:20-26, NRSV

¹² Luke 6:27, Matthew 5:43-44, NRSV

¹³ Luke 10:25-37, NRSV

¹⁴ Luke 14: 11, NRSV

¹⁵ Luke 13:30, NRSV