

Palms, Passion, Politics, and Prayer
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Matthew 21:1-13
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Before I begin, a word of explanation about our special communion banner. No doubt you've seen the photo on this banner many times before. It's probably the most widely published photograph in human history. It is the first clear image of the illuminated face of the Earth. Officially, it's known as "The Blue Marble"—named by the astronauts on the Apollo 17 spacecraft, who saw it from a distance of about 28,000 miles.

One other bit of trivia: Originally the photo had the South Pole at the top of the image. It was rotated, with the north oriented to the top, before being distributed.

Many years ago, on a trip to Puerto Rico, I was killing time in the San Juan airport, awaiting my flight home by browsing in the airport gift shop. That's where I spied a map of the world that was both familiar and confusing. It was familiar in that all the continents were depicted in the usual arrangement with each other. But the map had the island of Puerto Rico in its center, and so all the usual assumptions we make about the shape of the world were distorted. Not unlike seeing a photo of the Earth with the south at the top.

As it happens, this year the annual Earth Day celebration—observed every year since 1970 on April 22—is the same day as Good Friday, the day Christians mark as the time of Jesus' crucifixion. This coincidence provides a perfect occasion to make a vitally important theological statement. And it is this: The faith that we proclaim in the redemptive power of God is not limited only to human souls stripped from bodies.

To use traditional language, we are saved *for the world*, not *from* the world. The Gospel is *against the world* but *for* the Earth. The *world* and the *Earth* are different realities. The *world* is that complex web of destructive relationships which in fact are killing the Earth.

This distinction is crucial to our understanding of how we are meant to live in relation to the good news of Jesus. When we speak of the coming Reign of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, we are not talking about abandoning the Earth in favor of some place beyond the clouds. We are talking about a new rule, a new economy, a new politics for creation itself. Our palms, our passion, and our prayers find their purpose and their resolve in this new order of earthly promise.

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Today is Palm Sunday, an ancient Christian tradition commemorated each year on the Sunday prior to Easter. The text most commonly tied to Palm Sunday is today's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is both a parade and a death march.

The story says that the crowd gathered to meet Jesus cut branches from the trees—probably palm trees—and spread them on the road. In ancient near-Eastern tradition, the palm branch had long been associated with triumph and military victory. And in Judaism, riding on a donkey was both a sign of humility and of royal rule. The text includes the lines from the Prophet Zechariah, "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey" (9:9).

In other words, Jesus was engaging in some dramatic liturgy and risky political theatre. Liturgy and politics are always connected. Liturgy is the symbolic expression of our highest hopes for the future. It's how we communicate about what the future should look like. Politics is the mechanism we humans use to decide how to live together—of who gets what, when, where, and how. What the future should look like, and how the present is actually shaped, are irrevocably linked in our faith.

The lectionary passage for the day does not include the last two verses of our reading. That is to say, it doesn't include Jesus confronting the money changers in the temple. I've chosen to include it because the divine pageantry on display in the parade is directly linked to the human pain being wrought by the temple bandits.

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It's confusing, seeing a map with the South on top, or Puerto Rico right in the center. This same confusion was at work in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Jesus was consciously adopting the symbolism of sovereign royalty. Yet he was on a donkey, rather than a war horse; and instead of legions of armed troops, he was followed by a ragtag band of peasants. It was an upstairs-downstairs kind of confusion. South on top. Puerto Rico in the center.

I did not know until this week there is such a thing as the “Easter Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey.” A radio news story caught my attention, about how spending patterns around Easter are monitored closely by business forecasters.

Good news, folks. The National Retail Federation predicts that each of us will spend slightly more this year, \$118.60 on average, for a cumulative tab of \$13.03 billion for cards, candy, Easter bonnets, and the like.

Speaking of trivial news, another Easter story caught my attention this past week. One of the new Easter product lines, courtesy of CVS Pharmacy stores, is camouflage-colored eggs, with matching green and white armed plastic soldiers—“perfect for Easter egg hunts,” according to CVS publicity. There’s never been a shortage of poaching on Easter’s promise.

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Some of you have read the spiritual classic by C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, a book of satire written in the form of letters from Screwtape, a senior demon in the bureaucracy of Hell, to his nephew Wormwood, who is a rookie tempter sent to subvert the faith of a particular individual who is only identified as “the Patient.” Wormwood and Screwtape live in a “Lord of the Flies” kind of world, where might makes right, where greed is the greatest good, where moral values are reversed, and where religious commitment is innocuous. (Pretty much like the world as we know it now.)

At one point, Wormwood writes to his Uncle Screwtape in frustration, saying he’s tried everything he knows to get “the Patient” to stop saying his daily prayers. Screwtape responds in this way: “It is, no doubt, impossible to prevent his praying for his mother, but we have means of rendering the prayers innocuous. Make sure that they are always very ‘spiritual,’ that he is always concerned with the state of her soul and never with her rheumatism.”

Rendering prayer innocuous. Harmless. Childish make-believe. Fanciful thinking and wishful daydreaming. Frilly preoccupation with no reference to actual history. Kind of like the Jerusalem temple’s house of prayer being turned into a den of robbers. Why is it that robbers so frequently operate under the cover of prayer?

Reminds me of the comment that then Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott responded to reporters’ questions about the breaking news—shortly after Easter 2004—of the use of torture, sodomy, rape, and other forms of abuse against Iraqi prisoners in the now-infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. Here’s what the Senate’s leader said: “This is not Sunday school. This is interrogation. This is rough stuff.”

David B. Barrett related in the *International Bulletin* that several centuries ago, a Roman Catholic pope who was an avid patron of the arts was said to have surveyed the vast artistic riches he had amassed and to have gloated: “No longer can the Church of Jesus Christ say ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”

“True, Sire,” a subordinate replied, “but then neither can she now say, ‘Rise up and walk!’”

That kind of prayer reminds me of the famous words reportedly said by Captain Jack Hays of the Texas Rangers during the Mexican-American War. He offered this prayer shortly before leading his troops into battle at Palo Alto: “O, Lord, we are about to join battle with a vastly superior number of the enemy, and, Heavenly Father, we would mightily like for you to be on our side and help us. But if You can’t do it, for Christ’s sake don’t go over to the Mexicans, but just lay low and keep in the dark, and You will see one of the dangest fights you’ve ever seen. Charge!”

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The lectionary schedule for this Sunday’s Scripture texts presents an option. There’s this text about Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem, the story that includes the palm waving. Or the alternative—the readings that are part of what is referred to as the Passion story.

These include Jesus’ arrest, torture, and execution, prompted by his dispute with the temple authorities—those in collaboration with the Roman empire—and confirmed by Roman authority, which chose to brand Jesus as a threat to the state by its choice of nailing him to a cross. Such was the most humiliating form of capital punishment, for it was designed to strike terror in the hearts of any others who had insurrectionary hopes of overthrowing Roman rule. Crucifixion then was sort of like radical Islamists filming the beheading of a captured enemy and then posting the film on the web today. Or American soldiers photographing the humiliation of Muslim prisoners.

Unfortunately, the image of Jesus’ Passion has been popularized by the Mel Gibson movie *The Passion of the Christ*. In that movie, and in much popular Christian culture, Jesus displays a certain longing for suffering and death. By some accounts, his only purpose in life was to be mutilated and murdered, in order to satisfy the blood lust of a God who has been offended.

If that is your image of the Passion story, then you have missed the goodness of the Good News. Jesus surely knew what he was doing by entering Jerusalem. The crowds that welcomed him, shouting “Hosanna, hosanna,” were not mouthing innocuous pieties. They were not saying the equivalent of “Thank you, Jesus,” or “Glory hallelujah.” *Hosanna* means “liberate us from this oppression.” It was a shout of political, insurrectionary hope. The palms, the passion, the politics, and the prayer were all mixed up together.

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Easter parades of today—is that power expressed as violence is an empty promise of failed redemption. The tombs of its promoters are never emptied; its sealing stones are never rolled away; its blood-stained covenant of salvation never satisfies. The lust only grows. It feeds on itself. It is never exhausted. As author Lee Griffith wrote in *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, violence is actually a form of evangelism for the devil.

As the old Gospel hymn says, “The Way of the Cross Leads Home.” The really terrible thing is that, from this side of the story, we have no guarantee of resurrection from the various crosses we face in our own lives. The Passion story is a bet-your-asset kind of choice. To whom, in the end, do you believe the future belongs? By what power, finally, is redemption secured? With what community—among so many rival claims—are you prepared to travel, up to Jerusalem, up to a confrontation with the multitude of vengeful authorities that stand in your path, time after time, large ones and small, day after day and year in, year out?

Such are the choices we face. Think clearly. Pray fervently. Choose wisely. For your waving palms, your deepest passion, your inevitable politics, and your most earnest prayers are wrapped up together and brought to this table of baptismal vow and covenant promise.