

Sermon for Sunday, March 29, 2026—Palm Sunday

John 12:12-27 and John 19:16b-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's meditation has two parts. The first part is a story as told by a woman named Hannah who was living in Jerusalem during the events of what we call Holy Week. The second part consists of my concluding comments.

Hannah speaks: Every year we Jewish people celebrate a special holy day in Jerusalem called Passover. It's a day when we remember how God freed his chosen people from slavery in Egypt. This holy day is so important that it is expected that all practicing Jews will come to the city to celebrate the day. My husband Eli and I live in Jerusalem and we often have guests stay with us for Passover. This year Eli's cousin Levi and his wife Miriam came to celebrate Passover with us. They are from a small village in southwestern Judea.

Levi and Miriam came a few days ahead of the Passover celebration and were with us on Sunday. This was the day when Jesus of Nazareth entered the city riding on a donkey. Many people lined the streets waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord-- the King of Israel!" Being from a small village far away from Jerusalem and Galilee Levi and Miriam had never seen or heard of Jesus. They had many questions. Eli and I tried to explain what we had learned about him.

We told them that Jesus was a remarkable teacher and healer. Over the course of the last few years he had gone about Galilee performing miraculous healings. He reinterpreted the teachings of the Torah in ways that made a lot of sense to us regular folk. Jesus spent time teaching and healing people that we had been told to stay away from. There were two healings that amazed people. First he healed a man who had been unable to walk for 38 years. Then he gave sight to a man born blind. As a result people were starting to really pay attention to him.

Then, just a few days before Levi and Miriam arrived Jesus actually raised a man from the dead: his friend Lazarus from Bethany. As a result Jesus' reputation was spreading far and wide. People were seriously thinking that he might be the promised Messiah—the long

awaited king, sent by and blessed by God. So, when Levi and Miriam witnessed Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem and all the crowds waving palm branches, they were very puzzled. They had never heard of Jesus back at home. One thing was clear: the crowd was enthusiastically calling Jesus "king."

Levi and Miriam stayed with us all week. There were many tasks to perform to get ready for the Passover. On the day of Preparation Eli and Levi went out to purchase the lamb that we would roast for our Passover meal. That's when they witnessed the saddest thing. They saw Jesus escorted by a group of Roman soldiers. His clothing was in tatters, he had a crown of thorns on his head, and the skin of his back was covered with lash marks from being whipped. He was carrying his cross down the road all by himself. Curious, Eli and Levi followed the crowd and observed as Jesus was hung up on that cross on the hill outside of Jerusalem where many crucifixions occurred: the hill is called Golgotha: the place of the skull.

We explained to Levi and Miriam that Pilate is the Roman governor of this area and he was the one who posted a sign on the cross that said, "Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews." Pilate put up this sign to show everyone what would happen to anyone foolish enough to call himself a king. They would suffer a horrific public execution just like Jesus.

It's rather startling to think that in the short span of just a few days, the crowds that called Jesus the king of Israel, changed their chant to "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Some of the religious authorities even went so far as to say, "We have no king but the emperor!"

From my perspective as a Jewish woman living in Jerusalem, it's hard to know what to believe about this entire matter. Jesus never did anything sinful. He never broke any Roman laws. He acted with love and compassion toward everyone around him. But the people in power, whether religious or Roman were afraid of him. They were afraid that they would lose their power. That's why they trumped up false accusations against him. They were desperate to get rid of him to maintain their power and control. That's why they crucified him.

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Today is a day of stark contrasts. The pairing of the Palm Sunday text with the narration of Jesus' actual crucifixion demonstrates the fickleness of humanity. How quickly humans pivot from praise and

adulation to scorn and derision. In the space of just a few days Jesus goes from revered to crucified.

It's tempting for us to do the same: to go straight from the waving of the palms to Easter; to ignore what happens in between. But we must discipline ourselves and our thoughts by recognizing that we cannot get to Easter unless we go through the cross. We cannot get to Easter until we allow for and admit our human failings; our need for salvation. One Sunday we call Jesus the king and by Friday we are calling for his crucifixion. That pivot reflects us in our true humanity; reflects us in our deep failings as people. That's us in our sinfulness.

But God in Jesus turns the whole matter of royalty (kingliness) upside down. Isaiah 55:8 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD." In his day, no one would have called Jesus king. That idea was beyond imagination. He didn't fit any human notion of what a king should be or do. But God reminds us that God's way of salvation for the whole entire world is not one that we would have predicted. It was beyond earthly imagination. And God's imagination was to send God's son as Jesus to earth. And then God's imagination was to have Jesus spread a message of love and care for one another—especially and including the ones on the edges of society; the outcasts. And then after spreading this message all over Galilee and into Judea, God's imagination included the arrest, crucifixion, and death of God's son. Why? To demonstrate the extent to which God would go to prove the depth of God's love for each of us.

In conclusion: "For the gospel of John, Jesus being lifted up on a cross (exalted if you will) is exactly how Jesus is recognized as king. Jesus being lifted up proclaims him as king. To the extent that Jesus *is* a king the cross is how he is recognized. It is flipping the entire idea of what it means to be king upside down. Similar to the foot washing—when Jesus humbles himself and acts as a servant. Christians have been turning the world upside down for 2000 years now. Christians need only one king: and that king is Jesus. Amen.