

**2026-03-29 Palm and Passion Sunday –
Entering Jerusalem as the Upside-Down King
Pastor Lois Harder**

In her book, *A Beautiful Year*, Diana Butler Bass writes “Not until recently did I realize that I didn’t actually know what *hosanna* meant. I’d always assumed it was a synonym for *alleluia*, an expression of praise. But *hosanna* and *alleluia* are *not* the same. *Hosanna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew term hosi-ah-na meaning ‘*Oh, save now!*’ or ‘*Please save!*’ The crowd at the procession wasn’t shouting praises to Jesus. The crowd was begging Jesus to save them.”

We’ve heard for the last several Sundays now about the tension and struggle for power between the Roman political leaders and the Sanhedrin, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, I’m not sure how deeply we can truly appreciate the difficulty that power struggle was for those who were caught in it. For most people it was literally a struggle to survive. The poverty, the fear, the inability to change one’s own circumstances... and the constant praying and hoping and clinging to the possibility that God might someday decide to send the Messiah, the Savior, someone who would change this life and make it fair and bring relief. That struggle for survival and justice went on for generations and, in fact continues today for many people.

Hosanna – save us! Who remembers the rock opera film that came out in 1973, *Jesus Christ Superstar*? It was composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice. Diana Butler Bass also writes about her fond memories of that show and particularly the song Hosanna. I think they captured the essence of the palm procession brilliantly in that song. Taking off on the word hosanna, they sing “hosanna, hey sanna, sanna, sanna, hosanna, hosanna, hey sanna!” And then the verses go, “Hey JC, JC, won’t you smile at me... you’re alright by me... won’t you fight for me... won’t you die for me... sanna hosanna hey, superstar”. And in between the verses we hear from Ciaphas the High Priest, scolding the crowds, telling them to stop singing – and then Jesus’ response. Let’s have a listen... for old times’ sake. This is from the original 1973 film; it’s a classic! It’s unfortunate that there’s a light-skinned, blond haired man portraying Jesus.

When people are fickle and desperate – which we often are, what can we learn from Jesus about how to respond, from these passages in John 12 and 19? Well, lots of things! But I’d like to focus on three examples that Jesus gives us in these texts that I think we can learn from and follow. It’s three ideas that start with the letter “v” – volition, vast inclusiveness, and vision.

First, Jesus demonstrated volition. Volition is “The cognitive process and power of using one’s will to make conscious decisions and commit to a course of action. Volition is purposeful striving, doing something of one’s own accord rather than by force.” In spite of very real suffering, shame and humiliation Jesus was laser focused on what was in front of him to accomplish. He was absolutely nonviolent but never passive. Jesus actively approached those who came to arrest him in the garden. He assertively reminded Pilate that Pilate had no power except what God above had given him. And in chapter 19 Jesus determinedly carried the cross – by himself. This is different in John than in the synoptic accounts where Simon of Cyrene carried the cross at least part of the way for Jesus. That did not happen in John’s telling.

Another difference in John's gospel is that Jesus doesn't pray, "If it's possible let this cup pass from me". In chapter 12 he talks about how "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified. I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever." This is not Jesus encouraging people to literally hate their lives. But it is him demonstrating incredible volition – a clear-eyed understanding of what was happening and a stalwart determination to carry out what he had come to do.

In verse 27 Jesus acknowledges, "Now I am deeply troubled." But goes on, "What should I say? 'Father, save me from this time? No, for this is the reason I have come to this time. Father, glorify your name!'" This is volition.

Jesus was connected deeply to the source of his strength which, of course was God! He spent time with God praying, meditating, listening. He knew and drew strength from the scriptures. He participated in the religious rituals that gave him courage and inspiration. These are all things that we can do! As a human – as one of us, Jesus showed us clearly how to live out this volition, this determined and thoughtful decision-making that leads to action.

A second example that we can follow from what we see in Jesus in these passages is his commitment to vast inclusivity. In John's telling, just before Jesus' procession into Jerusalem he'd been at Mary and Martha's house, raising their dead brother Lazarus back to life. This remarkable act had catapulted Jesus into fame and John tells us that the resurrection of Lazarus caused both Jews and Gentiles to want to meet and follow Jesus. In verse 11 John writes, "It was because of Lazarus that many of the Jews had deserted (the chief priests) and had come to believe in Jesus." And in verse 20, "Some Greeks (or, Gentiles) were among those who had come up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and made a request, 'Sir, we want to see Jesus.'

For Gentiles to travel up to Jerusalem during the Passover meant that something really special and unusual was drawing them there. They were decidedly NOT a part of the festival! Not only did they come, but they asked to see Jesus. He was the magnet, the draw, the source of the good news of God's kingdom – where ALL are welcome! Pilate had it exactly, ironically correct when he wrote on the placard, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" AND he wrote it in all of the most commonly used languages of the day. God's kingdom is not an exclusive club where you have to pay your dues. It's not a tribe that's closed to you if you weren't born into it or a testing ground where you have to prove yourself. It's God's kingdom that Jesus revealed and offered. It's the beloved community where God's love and grace prevail. It's a place where healing and accountability and forgiveness are offered and accepted. God's kingdom is a place where peace with justice takes the highest priority, a place where the least are cared for and the king looks a lot like a Lamb and a Shepherd. It's no wonder people flock to this Shepherd King who is so vastly inclusive of humanity. Imagine how different the world would be if those of us who claim to follow Jesus were as inclusive as he is.

Finally, in these two passages Jesus showed us his vision. This upside-down king was anti-imperial. You might say he was a "No Kings King". Jesus entered the city as a king, for sure –

with the people crying “Hosanna!” “Save us!” They were rightly looking to him for their salvation, but in mistaken ways. The expectation of the Messiah was one who would exert political power but the Messiah described by John subverts these expectations in ways that challenge the Empire, not become part of it. In John 19 we see Pilate ironically affirming Jesus as “King of the Jews” despite protests by the religious leaders. But in doing so, in several languages, he announces Jesus’ death not as a low point or a failure but as the high point – his moment of glorification. This is the kind of king who hangs, sacrificially, from a cross, who shows his unconditional and complete love. And by doing so, paves the way for an entirely different, upside-down kind of world. Can we follow this part of Jesus’ example? I believe we can – if we give ourselves to ALL of the examples Jesus set for us with his life.

- First, his volition in knowingly taking on his own suffering for the good of the world.
- Second, we have the example of Jesus’ vast inclusion. Jesus came to bring God’s kingdom for ALL people to be apart of.
- And third, we’re shown Jesus’ vision – for an upside down kingdom. One that opposes Imperialism, Authoritarianism, and Kingship that lords it over people and doesn’t concern itself with their well-being. We can resist the unjust systems established by the world and live into Jesus’ upside down ways of living.

May we be given strength and courage as we follow this upside down king into Jerusalem – and in our daily lives.

Resources:

A Beautiful Year by Diana Butler Bass

John The Believers Church Bible Commentary by Willard Swartley

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/the-crucified-messiah-opt-triumphal-entry/commentary-on-john-1212-27-1916b-22-4>