

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Jesus Revolution**

Mark 15:1-15

Holy Week begins with a parade. Jesus rides into the capital city with a band of followers shouting praise and performing gestures of honor and adoration. The whole scene appears fit for a church play, complete with choruses, branches, and children dressed as Passover pilgrims. Just the kind of lighthearted joy that we need before we get into the darker and heavier events that culminate in Jesus' crucifixion.

But when we look closer, maybe what we're witnessing is less of a parade and more of a protest. Palm Sunday, after all, is full of politics. Remember that the Jewish people lived under Roman occupation, and the Romans could be particularly brutal and oppressive. Plus, this "parade" was taking place during a religious season when patriotic emotions ran high. National liberation would have been on the minds of God's people. They believed that in the last days, the God who had rescued his people from Egyptian slavery would send his anointed one, a descendant of David, to overthrow his people's oppressors and establish his reign, a society of perfect justice and peace.

This Messiah would rule from Jerusalem, which is exactly where Jesus is headed. You can understand why expectations were high among those who followed him into the city. As N. T. Wright has summarized it:

The crowd went wild as they got nearer. This was the moment they'd been waiting for. All the old songs came flooding back, and they were singing, chanting, cheering and laughing. At last, their dreams were going to come true. But in the middle of it all, their leader wasn't singing. He was in tears. Yes, their dreams were indeed coming true. But not in the way they had imagined.<sup>1</sup>

For one thing, Jesus rides into the capital not on a muscular warhorse but on a small donkey. He doesn't lead a well-equipped and highly trained army but a loose band of disorderly disciples who are still struggling to grasp who he is and what he has come to do. So all in all, this is a very strange display of royalty. Jesus certainly doesn't present himself in a way that fits with popular categories of kingship.

Now jump with me from Mark 11 to chapter 15, where we have today's primary text. Jesus is on trial before Pilate. The religious leaders have sent him there because they don't have the right to carry out a capital sentence themselves. Perhaps they also want to make sure that Jesus dies in the most dishonorable and humiliating way possible. They accuse him of treason and sedition, a charge that's sure to get Pilate's attention. After all, Rome can't tolerate insurrection and resistance to its empire, so surely Pilate will see his way clear to condemn Jesus.

But Pilate vacillates, and struggles to find a way out of the situation. When he asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?", in other words, a revolutionary trying to usurp Caesar's authority, Jesus essentially refuses to defend himself. And after the religious leaders bombard Jesus with additional accusations, he descends into silence. The silence is filled

with the noise of the crowd as it grows more and more restless for a verdict. Incited by the religious leaders, the mob persuades Pilate to exchange Jesus for Barabbas. Out of nowhere, we're introduced to someone else who is in state custody. Barabbas is behind bars, convicted of the same type of rebellion of which Jesus stands accused.

Barabbas is a violent insurrectionist, a would-be savior who has already been found guilty of murder. During his days as a free man, Barabbas was zealous about overthrowing the Roman invaders, and all options were on the table. That included armed revolution, if that's what was necessary to restore Israel to the glory it had known under King David. Author Walter Wangerin has described Barabbas as "the blood-lusty rake, the law-flout, violence glorified, appetites satisfied, James Bond, Billy Jack, Clint Eastwood, Rambo...."<sup>2</sup> So Pilate faces a choice. Rambo or Jesus. Which one will go free?

Pressured by the mob, Pilate chooses to release Barabbas. When the soldiers came down death row calling his name, Barabbas must have thought the time had come for his own execution, only to be told that someone else was going to bear that cross. In other words, Jesus experienced punishment and Barabbas experienced pardon. Jesus experienced condemnation so that we can experience liberation. The guilt of our sin destines us for death, but Jesus' gift of himself destines us for life. As N. T. Wright says, "Barabbas represents all of us. When Jesus dies, the brigand goes free, the sinners go free, we all go free."<sup>3</sup>

Being Christian means receiving and living into this forgiveness and freedom that we have through the death of Jesus. It means choosing Jesus, choosing the way of the cross, and choosing the things of Christ's reign rather than the things of other dominions that pass away. Pilate and the crowds in today's text aren't the only ones facing choices about which kingdom to promote and pursue. We ourselves have decisions to make about Jesus' kind of kingship.

Power according to Jesus doesn't look like power according to the kingdom of this world. It was that way under Roman rule. According to historian Garrett Fagan, "Romans lionized strength over weakness, victory over defeat, dominion over obedience. Losers paid a harsh price and got what they deserved, and [resisters] were to be ruthlessly handled.... Roman politics became a ruthless game of total winners and abject losers...."<sup>4</sup> In his life and ministry, and particularly in his suffering and death, Jesus identified himself with the losers. He went to the bottom instead of striving for the top.

We ourselves still face daily choices that call for us to resist the lure of power, money, status, and recognition. These are the kinds of things that would put us in the category of the winners. They promise prestige, prominence, and power. But life under the reign of Christ looks very different. Following King Jesus is less about grasping power and more about giving up power for the sake of others.

In the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, Simon the Zealot urges him to mount a proper revolution. He says, "You'll get the power and the glory, forever and ever and ever." But Jesus turns and sings, "Neither you, Simon, nor the fifty thousand; Nor the Romans, nor the Jews; Nor Judas, nor the Twelve, nor the Priests, nor the scribes; Nor doomed Jerusalem itself - Understand what power is. Understand what glory is. Understand at all. Understand at all."

A king who shows up in the capital city on a donkey. A ruler whose revolution happens by giving himself over to death. Royalty in the form of crucifixion. What kind of kingdom is this? As Jesus himself says, it's a kingdom not of this world. It's not conformed to the

values of this world. It's certainly an unimpressive revolution. It doesn't involve mounting an insurrection, storming Pilate's palace, and seizing control. On the contrary, it involves giving up one's life to reveal that God is in control.

As followers of King Jesus, we're revolutionaries. That includes our congregational worship. Though this may seem like a modest, nonthreatening Palm Sunday gathering, the praise that we offer to God alone, and the reality that we proclaim, namely, that Jesus Christ, the crucified one, is Lord, are so contrary to the present world's definitions of who's in charge and what things are to be valued. When we worship God together, we bring another kingdom into view.

The theologian Karl Barth once wrote, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." So when we assemble to pray, to sing, to preach, and to give, we're rising up against transient definitions of power and glory. We're confessing that power and glory belong to the Lord. And we're experiencing the strength of the Spirit who enables us to live out the priorities of Christ's kingdom when we're the church scattered into the world. That's where the challenges and choices can be the most difficult, when we're called to discern between power according to Barabbas and power according to Jesus.

Barabbas is an Aramaic name meaning "son of the father." What's also interesting is that in Matthew's Gospel, according to some translations, his name was Jesus Barabbas. Keep in mind that Jesus was a fairly widespread name in that day and time. Jesus Barabbas. Jesus, son of the father. So perhaps what we encounter in the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion is a call to decision. Like Pilate and the crowd, who will we choose? Will we choose Barabbas, the son of a human father, the one whose view of power led to violence and the taking of life? Or will we choose Jesus, the Son of the heavenly Father, whose view of power led to the giving of his own life, for us?

Too often we choose the way of Barabbas. We pursue a kingdom that's built on worldly definitions of glory and human definitions of power. We choose self-promotion over self-sacrifice. We choose personal gain over the public good. We choose being served over serving. We choose having it all instead of surrendering all. We choose violent ways over peaceful ways. We choose self will over God's will. We choose ways that cause death rather than ways that give life.

But thanks be to God, Jesus chose the way that leads to true glory. The journey that began with a donkey ride into the center of power ended in the powerlessness of crucifixion. Jesus, the innocent one, died for us, the guilty ones. He took upon himself the sentence for our sins, so that you and I could be forgiven and released into new life in the kingdom of the cross. Life in this kingdom isn't designed to be impressive, successful, or prosperous. It's designed to be revolutionary. It's designed to be a form of protest against definitions of power and glory that imprison us rather than set us free. The choice is set before you this day. Will you choose Jesus? Will you choose the way of the cross?

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, "On Palm Sunday, Jesus Rides into the Perfect Storm." ABC Religion & Ethics website. April 11, 2014. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/on-palm-sunday-jesus-rides-into-the-perfect-storm/10099320> (March 24, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Reliving the Passion: Meditations on the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus as Recorded in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 99.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Trevin Wax, "Don't Tell Me N. T. Wright Denies Penal Substitution." The Gospel Coalition website. April 24, 2007. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/dont-tell-me-nt-wright-denies-penal-substitution/> (March 24, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Garrett Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 33-34.