

You Are Being Tested

Lectionary Readings: *Luke 19:28-40; Psalms 118: 1-2, 19-29; Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalms 31: 9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22-23*

Palm Sunday has always struck me as odd. Like there's something off about it. Like a beautiful chord that modulates into something dissonant that doesn't resolve. Or, like one of those cookies that looks like chocolate chip but when you bite it you find out it's full of raisins. We gather, as we did this morning, waiving our palm leaves, playing our instruments, celebrating Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. You can even hear Jesus getting caught up in the joy of it all: "if the people were silent, the stones would shout out!"¹ And yet... Jesus knows what he's riding in to: humiliation, suffering, almost certain death. This joy-suffering dichotomy is expressed in our liturgical readings today. Psalm 118 is all about exulting in God's goodness and mercy. But Psalm 31 is all about being consumed with sorrow and wasted with grief.

So, are we supposed to be happy today or sad? What is Palm Sunday really about? The answer, I think, is given to us in our Collect, which summarizes our readings from Isaiah and Philippians. In these readings we find a common pattern: something very good happens, followed by something very bad; and this bad thing is a test. Passing the test is very challenging. If we fail we remain as we were. If we pass, we're transformed into something wonderful that wouldn't have happened unless we had passed the test.

In Isaiah the very good thing is that the word of God has gotten through to Isaiah and Isaiah now has the power to do good in the world. He writes: "Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught." Isaiah now has "the tongue of a teacher" and can "sustain the weary with a word". So Isaiah now has the power to help other people by instructing them. But, then, despite this blessing from the Lord, very bad things start to

¹ Luke 19:40.

happen to Isaiah. People insult him, they spit on him, they physically batter him and pull out his beard. This is Isaiah's test. People do not accept his divine blessing of knowledge and power. They openly oppose him. Isaiah, as you may recall, is one of the mighty prophets who spoke truth to power. But he was reviled for it. And therein was his test. How did he respond? As Isaiah puts it, he was not rebellious. He offered his back to those who were striking him. He presented his cheeks to those who were pulling out his beard. The result? Isaiah receives even *more* knowledge and *more* divine power. He now knows that he can take all this abuse because the Lord God helps him. He knows that his vindication is near. He realizes that his ultimate judge is not his adversaries but rather God, and he thus has the power to withstand the evil that comes his way.

What if Isaiah had responded differently to his test? What if he had sought to hurt his enemies as they had hurt him? What if he had decided to pay them back in kind? If Isaiah had avenged his enemies, do you think he would have gained the knowledge and divine power to see his own value in light of God's righteous judgment?

In our reading from *Philippians* we're reminded that a very good thing has happened: Christ has emptied himself in becoming a human in Jesus, blessing the world with his amazing life: showing mercy, forgiving people, healing people, welcoming the poor and the oppressed. But Jesus is tested. His ultimate test is at Gethsemane, where he is in deep agony over his impending doom. But, he passes the test. And let's be clear: Jesus's test is the *ultimate* test: "He became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross".² Consequently, Jesus is highly exalted by God. What do you think? Do you think Jesus would have been exalted above every name had he not passed the test?

It would be easy to miss the point of our *Philippians* reading. Don't miss the point. It begins with these words: "Let the same mind be in you that was

² *Philippians* 2:8

in Christ Jesus”.³ We say that as Christians we follow Jesus. What does this mean? It doesn’t mean we believe some doctrinal statements or that we have a positive attitude about Jesus (even though we do). When Jesus calls us to follow him he calls us to action. And when we follow him, we will be tested.

This, I’m now convinced, is the meaning of Palm Sunday for us. Something very good and worth celebrating has happened, and now something very bad is happening. This very bad thing is testing us with a challenge so difficult that passing it will transform us into something great that would’ve surprised our earlier selves before we were tested. Or we could fail the test and remain as we were.

This year the meaning of Palm Sunday has really hit home for me. Perhaps it will for many of you as well. As a Christian living in America, I’ve been thrown for a *loop* in recent times. Many of the kinds of Christian people I grew up among are now openly deriding core Christian values such as compassion and empathy. Are you aware that some evangelical pastors and theologians have been warning Christians not to commit the sin of empathy? One evangelical pastor accused Episcopal Bishop Budde of committing the sin of empathy in her sermon during the Service of Prayer for the Nation back in January. How did Bishop Budde supposedly commit the sin of empathy? She asked President Trump to have mercy on undocumented immigrants. In response, the evangelical pastor I mentioned tweeted on X: “Do not commit the sin of empathy. This snake is God’s enemy and yours too. She hates God and his people. You need to properly hate in response.”⁴ Apparently, this tweet made

³ *Philippians* 2:5

⁴ There’s *much* more to say about empathy than I can discuss in this short homily. Here I’ll just mention that Joe Rigney is a theologian who in 2019 brought the idea of “the sin of empathy” to the evangelical consciousness. For an eye-opening exchange about the topic between Rigney and Albert Mohler, see here: (<https://albertmohler.com/2025/02/19/joe-rigney/>). Rigney’s argument, based on a reasonable one from C.S. Lewis, is that kindness, when directed at a bad object, can lead us into error. But, that is as far as the good reasoning from Rigney goes. Here I mention only two brief criticisms of the charge of the sin of empathy directed at Bishop Budde: (1) Bishop Budde’s sermon is most certainly tethered to biblical teaching, and (2) Rigney concedes that using the term “the sin of empathy” is intentionally provocative. He is surely right about that, as his term has been used to demonize Christians like Budde who are obeying Christ.

quite an impression on social media. A number of people I went to high school with subsequently mocked and demonized Bishop Budde. Her sermon was, of course, just standard, orthodox, biblical teaching in the prophetic tradition. It's no secret what prompted the evangelical backlash: President Trump took umbrage with the Bishop's remarks and disparaged her on social media. She spoke biblical truth to power and the power did not like it, because the power thinks mercy is weak. The result is that many who align themselves with that power are now openly deriding Christians for being compassionate toward marginalized people.

What some of us are now realizing to our horror is that there are tens of millions of self-professed Christians in America who have put their trust in a power that is at odds with the most fundamental trajectory of the teachings of Jesus.⁵ The result is that we are now being mocked, disparaged, and demonized for empathizing with poor people and hurting people and marginalized people. In short, we're being attacked for trying to follow Jesus by obeying him.

I now understand some scriptures that never made sense to me before. In all the synoptic gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*), Jesus is recorded saying things like: brother will betray brother and a father his child. Luke quotes Jesus as saying that there will come a time when "even those closest to you—your parents, brothers, relatives, and friends—will betray you".⁶ And in *Matthew*, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—and a man's enemies will be the members of his own household".⁷

These verses always bothered me. If Jesus is the Prince of Peace, how is it that he has *not* come to bring peace but rather a sword? Now I get it. To follow

⁵ I do not here claim that they are blameworthy for this. It is plausible that some or perhaps many have been diabolically manipulated or conned into this.

⁶ *Luke* 21: 16-18.

⁷ *Matthew* 10:34-36.

Jesus is to obey him. And to obey him is to live a life that will in fact scandalize those who resist God's inclusion of the poor, the meek, and the sorrowful. You see: the peace that Jesus offers is a genuine inclusive peace, not the counterfeit peace you get when one group dominates others into submission. Thus, Jesus's peace will conflict with those who see our common life together not as something for all of us to learn to appreciate in our plenitude and diversity, but rather as a zero-sum game, where some people (the dominators) are the winners and other people must be losers.

This is a test. Of course, there's a sense in which we're always being tested. But, for me, and I suppose for some of you, the test of this moment is visceral and existential for the first time in our lives. The executive branch of our government is now violating our traditional rule of law in a variety of domains. We don't know where it will stop or who will be silenced or removed. We do know that the executive branch is actively doing the same kinds of things that dictators have done in the past as they begin their power moves to gain control.⁸ *This is a test.* Will we pass the test by being obedient to our Lord? How do we pass it?

Here's what I think: Each of us must *seek* to know *how* we are being called to obey Christ and then we must do it. It won't be the same for all of us. For some, it may include resistance via activism or speaking truth to power. For others it may include educating people. For others it will be serving people by feeding, showering, healing, or housing them. For some it will be working in support roles in offices or courts or businesses, doing behind the scenes administrative or custodial work that supports the common good. For those blessed with wealth, it will include giving for the common good as our government defunds programs of medical research, disease eradication, and

⁸ In America's current, highly polarized political climate it is difficult for some people to hear any criticism of a political figure without assuming the critic is making a partisan comment on behalf some political party. But, I am most emphatically *not* doing any such thing here; rather, I am pointing out facts only about the current Presidential administration.

alleviating world hunger. I don't know what you're being called to do, and thus I don't know the contours of your specific test.

But, I know this. Passing the test will cost you. It may cost you friends, it may cost you family members, your reputation, your livelihood. It might even cost you your life. But, let's be clear: as Christians we have never been called to save our lives. We've been called to be *faithful* to Christ. This doesn't mean we should not do things we enjoy during this time of testing; indeed, we need the refreshment of what we enjoy. But it *does* mean that we must now be the church in a society that is increasingly hostile to us.

This is a test. It calls for action, and the action is to follow Jesus' way. This path is narrow.⁹ There are pitfalls to the left and the right we must avoid. We must not confuse having the right *views* with following our Lord. We must do and not merely believe. We must not allow our righteous anger at present conditions to derail our mission. We must avoid unhealthy pride: we must not relish our knowledge that we're on the right side whereas those who demonize us are on the wrong side. And we must not allow our righteous anger to devolve into malice or violence toward those who oppose us. Recall the nonviolent examples of Isaiah and Jesus. We must remember that every single person who opposes us is the beloved child of God. Our work is not to defeat our enemies. It is to overcome evil with good.¹⁰

May we seek to know what our contribution is to be, and may we faithfully do it, whatever may come and whatever the cost.

⁹ See *Matthew* 7:14.

¹⁰ See *Romans* 12:21.