

Sermon on March 24, 2024, Rev. Tori Sumner

Mark 11:1-11: When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"

They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it.

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

On December 10, 1989, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City was filled with hundreds of people, and a crowd of over four thousand stood outside. All were waiting in anticipation; all knew something important was about to happen. Inside the church, protestors quietly handed out fliers that

explained why they were there and what they hoped to achieve. ACT UP, the fliers read. STOP THE CHURCH.

As the mass got underway, these protestors lay on the ground, scores of them, filling the pews and aisles. This was the plan: these members of ACT UP, an organization fighting for the lives of those who had HIV/AIDS, would stage a “die-in”: a demonstration where their physical bodies laying on the ground represented all who had died and would die due to AIDS.

It was a visible accusation: these deaths were preventable. And yet the church had been complicit, over and over again, in homophobia, in opposing safe sex practices, in leaving queer people to die.

I can only imagine it was a moment of absolute anguish: to lay on the ground representing your friends who had died, the death you might soon be facing, and to watch the service around you go on as if nothing was happening. To watch the world around you go on as if nothing was happening.

And so in a moment of desperation one protestor cried out: “Stop killing us! Stop killing us! We’re not going to take it anymore! Stop it! Stop it!” Video footage of the protest shows the cardinal rubbing his forehead as if irritated with this turn of events, as other protestors joined in the shouting and the service turned into chaos.

111 people were arrested that day, for their grief, for crying out, for protesting mass death.

I’m going to be honest with you: this story, every time, gives me chills. It breaks my heart to know the incredible suffering that queer people before me have endured. And it fills me with pride to witness the courage and resilience that queer people before me have had in the face of a world that

did not seem to care whether they lived or died, that buried them under the weight of shame and secrecy.

I think this story of a courageous entry into a hostile church has something to teach us today as we read the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We have heard this story so many times, and so disembodied from its context, that it is often hard to picture what it might have felt like. But what if we picture the energy of those four thousand people gathered outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral, waiting, hoping, longing for change? How might we picture the crowds that gather for Jesus, hoping that he will finally bring the change they have been longing for?

As you know, Jerusalem is the religious center of the Jewish world; it is where people come to worship. But remember it was also under the rule of the Roman Empire at this time. The Jewish people were living in a constant state of fear and struggle. There was always a heavy Roman tax waiting to be paid, always a Roman soldier around the corner, always the threat of being arrested and even killed if you disobeyed.

The threat of death was real and palpable. And it was visible, too: the Romans nailed people onto stakes and crosses along the roads outside of cities, just to show their power to kill all those who dared to defy them. If you protested, if you proved a political or religious threat—you would be crucified and left to die a slow and brutal death.

And yet even with such harsh treatment, the Roman emperor expects the people's reverence and worship. The Roman emperor says: You will treat me as Lord, *or else*.

It is into this political context that Jesus plans a protest. And yes—we have every indication that this is, in fact, a staged, planned, defiant act of protest. It seems Jesus has already had a colt set aside for his disciples to

retrieve ahead of time, and outlined particular code language for them to use in the exchange. Jesus sends the disciples ahead so that he can enter the city in a particular way: riding a donkey, with people bowed down and laying their cloaks and their palms before him.

To Roman eyes, this would clearly be an imitation of a military procession.

As commentator Charles L. Campbell writes, “When Jesus does finally enter the city, he enjoys all the trappings of a great military procession for a triumphant national hero. The people participating in the event do everything a victorious military leader would expect. In actions that would have been considered treasonous by the empire, the crowd spreads branches and cloaks before Jesus as a symbol of honor. They praise him, shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” “God saves.” “Long live the King!” And Jesus rides through the midst of the adoring crowds.”

This is defiance. This is treason. This is a protest—just as much a protest as ACT UP entering St Patrick’s Cathedral and laying in the aisles.

Jesus is protesting the empire’s reign of death, of domination, of oppression and exploitation. Jesus is protesting and saying: It shouldn’t be this way. It doesn’t have to be this way.

And the people, the crowds, are shouting: Hosanna! Hosanna!

This word, Hosanna, is an interesting one. Sometimes we use it interchangeably with Hallelujah, but it isn’t the same. Hallelujah is the Hebrew word meaning “Praise God.” Hosanna, however, is from a Hebrew phrase that literally means “Please save us.”

Even as it sounds here like it might be an expression of praise or adoration, we shouldn’t miss the undertones: It is a shout for someone who

is coming to save you. It is a cry to be saved: *Hosanna! Hurray! You are coming to save us! Save us, please!*

If we were in the crowds, we might hope something dramatic would happen: a military uprising, perhaps, or Jesus storming and taking over the temple. We might imagine Roman soldiers bowing at his feet. Or perhaps, if we were in those crowds outside the cathedral, we might imagine the cardinal putting his head in his hands and weeping. We might imagine him standing and offering an apology for the centuries of exclusion and oppression; we might imagine him outstretching his arms in an open welcome to queer people and HIV-positive people near and far.

Yet we know this isn't how the story goes. We know on that day in 1989, 111 people were arrested. We know many of them certainly died of AIDS, and the church did nothing to stop it.

We know that according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus walked around the city for a bit, and then headed back out into the hills for the night. We know later that week he too was arrested, and put on trial, and then his weak and dying body was put on display for all to see. We know that, for all the excitement and fervor and hope of this protest, at the end of the week, Jesus will be dead.

Is this, really, a triumphal entry?

We have spent the past weeks wandering in the wilderness of Lent. We have felt the hunger and thirst of the desert, of longing for change, of dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death and not knowing when we will emerge. With the Israelites in the wilderness, with Jesus in the desert, our hearts have ached. We have yearned for healing, for change, for triumph.

Yet it seems, at the end of this wilderness, as Jesus makes his triumphal entry, that triumph is not what it seems. That triumph sometimes looks and feels like death.

Friends—Easter is coming. It's coming. But before it comes we have one more week in the wilderness, one more holy week. And this week surely is holy, and perhaps it holds a kind of triumph that is different than what we expect.

Perhaps what Jesus' triumphal entry shows us is this: even in the wilderness, even in the face of death, even when we feel lost and powerless, we can still use our voices. We can still stand up and say something, even if it is simply to say: *I have dignity. My life matters. Our voices matter. We will not be silenced.*

As we have learned this Lent, sometimes, in the wilderness, we complain. Sometimes we plan a protest. And sometimes we scream, and throw ourselves on the dusty ground, and repeat, "Stop killing us. Save us. Save us. Hosanna. Hosanna."

As we walk with Jesus to his death this week, may we find that even if triumph doesn't come about the way we hoped, there is still salvation waiting for us.

Amen.

Hosanna / Save us - Stop Killing Us

- Roman empire as killing machine, temple authorities as complicit
- Similar to US government and Catholic church
- Excitement and expectation for the protest/triumphal entry to go a certain way that it doesn't go
- Palms are symbols of victory—reveal their expectations
- Royal and military undertones to this scene—yet a donkey is ridden by princes as a symbol of peace, not war
- Colt that has never been ridden before—ceremonially pure
- Like Jesus ultimately ends in arrest
- Success and triumph are not always what we expect

Sometimes in the wilderness we complain. Sometimes we plan a protest. And sometimes we scream, and throw ourselves on the dusty ground, and repeat, “Stop Killing Us. Stop killing us.”

Hosanna. Hosanna.

- Jesus models for us that even in the midst of death there is salvation—we still have a voice

Focus: Jesus' triumphal entry is a protest –that isn't very triumphant by our standards

Function: In the wilderness, we too can use our voices and protest, even if triumph doesn't come about the way we hope

Claim: There is salvation and triumph even in the midst of wilderness and death