

Palm Sunday's weird. You know the story: after a period of itinerant homelessness full of miracles and sermons, Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem. He knew this wouldn't end well for him, but he still went. And when he got there, he asked to ride a donkey and a colt, the logistics of which are left delightfully vague. Which kinda works, because Jesus' triumphal entry didn't look like a typical triumphal entry, at least not the kind they would've been used to seeing. Between the palms and the hosannas and the people lining the roadside, it sure seems triumphal. But Matthew doesn't actually say anything about palms. Only John does. The rest just say "branches," probably willow or olive branches. And I kinda think that matters. When I think of palm fronds and triumph, I think of a lazily reclined Elizabeth Taylor, grapes, and strapping lads fanning her languidly. But willows and olives are regular things along all kinds of roadsides, easy to come by, plentiful, everyday. Regular stuff for regular people.

Regular stuff for regular people's kinda Jesus' whole thing. Most of his miracles, most of his parables, most of his days are full of everyday stuff. Fish and nets and farmers and illness and water and gardens and everyday peoples' everyday problems. He does miracles, but he doesn't do huge things. The biggest things he's done by the time he gets to Jerusalem are feeding a big crowd and raising a single man from the dead. Now, that last one admittedly's pretty impressive, I've never managed it. But it's just one guy, not a nation's worth of reanimated dead. Powerful sure, but focused on just one person. So, sticks grabbed from the side of the road kinda fit for someone like Jesus. The horse he rides in on is no charging steed. It's still a baby. If he even rides on the colt, that is. If it's the donkey, that's even less majestic. Donkeys're made for work and carrying heavy loads. They're not made for triumphant returns.

There's an old story that says while Jesus was entering Jerusalem from one side of the city, there was a massive military parade returning from a victorious campaign coming in through a gate clear on the other side of the city. And in that story, they compare the twin triumphant returns. In the one, a general sits atop a massive warhorse; imagine something like a clydesdale with armored chest and shoulders standing higher than a man's eyes. Imagine the sound of chariot wheels on cobblestone, spears held vertical clanking against neighboring soldier's pikes. Imagine helmets glinting, scabbards slapping against leather, the roar of a crowd in awe of the might they fear on full display, captives dragged limping in their conquered shame. Imagine carts carrying plundered riches, soldiers arguing over who took more lives, the people of the city wary of the delicate situation wherein your captor is also your protector. Imagine the regalia, the robes, the status, the reach of the empire's march. Maybe you're there because there's nothing else going on and it's a way to pass the time. Or maybe you have to be, maybe you've been forced to line the streets, coerced into cheering, trying to keep your head low by going along with this just enough to hide from suspicion. Maybe acting the part is how you keep your family safe.

Now imagine Jesus coming through a different gate. He has a mount, but it's no behemoth. It's the same creature used to pull a plow. There's no weaponry, no glinting helm, no captives humiliated. There's no might, no regalia, no riches. If these followers argue, it's over who's been the most like their peaceful leader. No victorious general, no conquering army, no robes or crowns or blowing horns. The people lining the streets are there because they choose to be. The people singing to be saved pray as much as they speak. This isn't coercion. The joy is real and deep and voluntary. This isn't just the kind of leader they want. This is the kind of life they want, one free from the manipulative power of flexed might. It's mercy that defines God not flexed power; it's humility where appeals to grandeur rule the day; quiet confidence and subtlety in place of bloviation and gilded styrofoam. It's a mighty compelling thing to be reminded of the true strength of Christ, and when we live it out,

it's astounding what we can accomplish. But sometimes people get things twisted and the difference between the procession of the victors and the procession of Christ gets muddy.

Look at the end of that bit from Philippians. "At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow." Too often, that's a bow predicated on cruelty and power, requiring the defeat and exploitation of enemies forced to bow before God. It's understandable that we get that twisted. That's what power usually looks like, so why should it be any different? But that's the point; it *is* different. It's different because we're talking about God's way of doing things, not people's. There is a certain kind of power in this world, but what the world misses is spelled out in that first part of Philippians. It's through mercy, though loving-kindness, through humility and peace and love, it's through sacrifice that we claim our power. Jesus didn't defeat the empire with a conquering army and the strength of his hand. He overcame the empire with his disarming commitment to peace, his turned cheek, his final breath on the cross. The powers of this world can't understand that kind of power. Faced with an unwavering commitment not to use their methods, they can't understand that kind of unworldly response from a place not of vengeance or anger or fear but from the loving, unflagging recognition of the other person's humanity. There are few things more intimidating than those who've taken the words "be not afraid" to heart and still refuse to raise a fist.

Y'all know that a lot of what's masquerading as Christianity today contradicts the teachings of Christ. Seems every week, every day has examples of this. Well, we got one of the most worrying contradictions of Christ's teaching so far last week. The Secretary of not-a-War led a Christian service at the Pentagon. And in that service, he said a prayer. He said, "Let every round find its mark against the enemies of righteousness and our great nation. Give them wisdom in every decision, endurance for the trial ahead, unbreakable unity, and overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy." Y'all, that's not Jesus. "Let every round find its mark" and "overwhelming violence?" Those are bad enough, and we should stand against that kind of misuse of our faith. But the part that troubles me the most is the description of our enemies as "those who deserve no mercy." That's fundamentally opposed not only to the teachings of Jesus, that goes back to the earliest stories in the Old Testament, too. Over and over again, our story is one of humanity's failures met by God's offer to try a new way. From Eden to Egypt, Judges to Kings, Samaria to Jerusalem, our story reminds us and reminds us again that while we may be flawed, we remain God's. A long time ago, an old priest told me his favorite definition of "grace." Grace is "getting the good things you don't deserve and not getting the bad things you do."

"Deserve" just isn't in Jesus' calculus. There is no part of my salvation that I deserve. None that you do. None that anyone does. If that prayer were to come true, if God heard the Secretary's prayer and made good, we'd all be in trouble since we don't "deserve" the saving sacrifice of Christ nailed to the cross. "Deserve" isn't in Jesus' calculus, but "mercy" is. And mercifully, we follow the power that enters Jerusalem not with a sword but with an olive branch, not with a warhorse but with a donkey, not with a crown but with a song. Palm Sunday's weird because we insist in the face of the world's power that regular love, regular kindness, and extraordinary sacrifice are greater than any empire's march. Palm Sunday's weird because, knowing full well the physical danger we face, we decide to stand for a king that frees us, no matter what we deserve. Palm Sunday's weird because at the end of this week, the empire will scramble to explain why they failed and peace won. Palm Sunday's weird, because no matter how much the world tries to make the power of God's theirs to wield, no matter how much the world tries to undermine peace, make Jesus into a general, draft us to their service, no matter what, they'll never conquer the peace that entered on the back of a donkey, turned swords into plows, and left tombs empty. That is the peace which passes their understanding. That is the power we wield. That is the man we follow. And this week, that is the man we follow all the way to the grave where we

find not the loss the world demands but the hope the world requires. And when we put our hope in Christ's way of doing things, we shall never hope in vain.