



Ravensworth

BAPTIST CHURCH

March 29, 2026 | Palm Sunday

John 12:12-19 | *Conversations with Jesus: The Crowds*

Rev. Dr. Leah Davis, preaching

Who is this guy? They kept asking. Who does he think that he is? People did not respond kindly as the prophet entered the big city, but he had gotten used to that. He was a prophet, some said; he was a troublemaker, others chided. What does he have to say that is so revolutionary anyway? He certainly isn't one of us, said the powerful.

He had stood in the important religious sites—and even some that weren't religious—some that were monuments to history, to culture, to division--speaking about justice and love and how all were created in the image of God. It's not surprising then that his message upset some people. There were threats to his life, to his family, to his co-laborers in the field. And yet, he pressed on as he entered the city that day. The crowds ran deep, bearing witness to his ministry, his prophetic work—the crowds were all around him as he walked up to enter the gates.

The empire was swirling with wars and rumors of wars. I often wonder how Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., felt on that April day in 1967, just a few days after Palm Sunday, when he climbed the steep steps of the pulpit at the Riverside Church in New York City and delivered his "Beyond Vietnam" speech.

59 years ago, this coming Saturday, he stood in the historic pulpit at the Riverside Church and proclaimed,

“Some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.

Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement, and pray that our inner being may be sensitive to its guidance. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.

This, I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation’s self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls “enemy,” for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our siblings.”¹

I’ve shared this text before on Palm Sunday and I thought it was critical to hear it again this year. This call to resistance and dissent rings just as true now, doesn’t it? He was speaking about Vietnam. But he could just as easily be speaking about Iran or Venezuela or Cuba and the atrocities happening there. Or about South Sudan where children are starving. Or Palestine. Or Israel. Or Bahrain. Or the border of our country with Mexico or countless other places.

King’s words made the world upset. He was viewed as a threat because he dared to speak about innocent people, the lives of people who look different than those in power and the call of God to love everyone. As he spoke out against war and injustice and for the radical ideas that all are equal, his prophetic message upset the authorities.

Our friend Ken Sehested reminds us, “We forget the scandal he provoked that day--King was savaged in the media.

¹ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “[Beyond Vietnam](#),” Delivered at The Riverside Church, New York City. April 4, 1967.

- *Life Magazine* called it “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.
- *The Washington Post* said “King has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, his people.
- *Reader’s Digest* warned it might provoke an “insurrection.”²

He offered this speech on April 4, 1967. Exactly one year later, April 4, 1968, he was murdered. One year after he entered the city to proclaim release to the captives and calling the people of God to speak, he was murdered in Memphis.

On this almost April morning in 2026, we have the story of another prophet who entered a city, quite peacefully, but his words and his body was viewed as such a threat that he too was eventually murdered. On this morning, we turn ourselves away from New York City, away from Washington, D.C., just for a minute, and instead, turn our faces toward the city of Jerusalem.

This day is Palm Sunday, the day in our church year when we wave palm branches and shout Hosannas to the highest heaven. Our children have prepared the way for the Lord. We are preparing the way to the cross, even as we cry out to Jesus to save us, now!

The crowds were thrilled to respond with who he was—he is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee, they said, as branches waved and the streets became more narrow the further they went into the city.

There were multitudes of devout followers of God who did justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with their God. The Jewish people of Jerusalem were not the people who rejected Jesus, it was the power of the empire and the religious leaders who felt threatened.

Many of you have read Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan’s *The Last Week*, so you know where I am going. Marcus Borg writes of the week we call Holy, “Less well-known is the historical fact that a Roman imperial procession

² Ken Sehested, “[When the Dream Gets a Bit Dreamy](#),” *Prayer & Politics*, April 4, 2017.

was also entering Jerusalem for Passover from the other side of the city. It happened every year: the Roman governor of Judea, whose residence was in Caesarea on the coast, rode up to Jerusalem in order to be present in the city in case there were riots at Passover, the most politically volatile of the annual Jewish festivals. With him came soldiers and cavalry to reinforce the imperial garrison in Jerusalem.

It is clear what Pilate's procession was about. By proclaiming the pomp and power of empire, its purpose was to intimidate. But what about Jesus's procession, his entry into the city?

Thus for Passover that year, two very different processions entered Jerusalem. They proclaimed two very different and contrasting visions of how this world can and should be: the kingdom of God versus the kingdoms, the powers, of this world. One was a procession of power, and one was a protest of that very power-laced procession.

One is about justice and the end of violence. The other is about domination and exploitation. On Friday, the rulers of this world kill Jesus. On Easter, God says "yes" to Jesus and "no" to the powers that executed him.

Thus, Palm Sunday announces the central conflict of Holy Week. The conflict persists. In words from St. Paul, the rulers of this world crucified the Lord of glory. That conflict continues wherever injustice and violence abound.

Holy Week is not about less than that."³

Jesus entered Jerusalem during Passover Week on a donkey, through the back gate, with people shouting:
Hosanna! Save us, now!

They weren't asking to be saved in a spiritual way. They were asking for the kings of their day to be brought down from their thrones. They were asking for Jesus to save them from the powers of the day that exploited them.

³ Marcus J. Borg, [Holy Week: Palm Sunday](#), personal blog.,

The people following Jesus knew this entrance into the city to be a political protest, and they joined in! Along with that, Lazarus was part of the procession. Lazarus, recently raised up was with the group, and earlier in this chapter we hear that the religious authorities want to kill him! Because of Lazarus' raising, the bearing witness and the fame of Jesus has reached new heights. People are sharing the news that empire and the way of death is not the way of Jesus. They must protest this conflation of God's love and justice for the way of Empire.

Dr. Eric C. Smith wrote, "Although Christianity has largely theologized Jesus' death and cast his last days as a journey of self-sacrifice in the service of expunging sin, the New Testament gospels really tell a story of political conflict and entanglement. While modern Christians prefer to understand Jesus' death in religious terms, the gospel writers describe it in starkly political terms.

They tell Jesus' story as one of ratcheting tension between Jesus and the Roman occupation, in which Jesus' increasingly provocative actions lead him farther and farther into danger. They are sure to name the names of the Roman officials (and captive underlings like Herod) who take Jesus into custody and keep him there, and they enumerate the soldiers who do the dirty work of attaching him to a cross. While Christians today often spiritualize Jesus' death, the gospels are clear that he was executed by a government, and that that government executed him because they thought he was a threat to their power. Jesus died on a Roman cross, killed by the Roman state, because of the jealousy of Roman power.

So what? Well, we live in a time when expressions of state power and acts of state violence have become increasingly pronounced. As I write this here in the United States, there are rumors of ICE agents being deployed to airports in the name of security and efficiency, blurring the line between police and military and civil service, and raising the possibility of the kinds of violence and death that have been seen in Minneapolis and elsewhere. A war rages in the skies over Iran, threatening to spill out into the wider world. Massive protests were scheduled for this weekend.

The world is a tinderbox, just like it was when Jesus hopped onto a donkey (or two) and tried to seize the throne for himself—or mock the people who already sat on it. People in power ratchet up violence to protect themselves, and suddenly from the perspective of people in power, everyone looks like a threat. Subtlety goes out the window, discourse curdles, and before long it doesn't matter whether someone like Jesus was trying to be the king or be the court jester, because either way he ends up hanging on an imperial cross. Suddenly, all the roads start leading to the same place, and it isn't a place most of us want to go."⁴

We, modern followers of Jesus Christ stand on this side of Holy Week. We must always face the truth. We will suffer. We will grieve. We will face the empire and we will resist. We will betray and we will be betrayed. But instead of joining Pilate's entry into Jerusalem—we join with the Prince of Peace on his journey of love, his protest of the ones who choose greed, death, war, and hate.

Today, we join that protest procession of Palm Sunday. Beginning in Minneapolis this year, a movement started called Palm Sunday was a protest. We've long named Palm Sunday as a protest, but the invitation was to join the Holy Week procession starting with a protest, aware of the consequences that protests often bring.

"Christians stand for loving our neighbors. We stand for healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and welcoming the stranger. We stand for telling the truth and honoring the dignity and worth of every child of God. On Palm Sunday, March 29th 2026, Christians across the country will stand up to the rise of authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism. We will stand against the politics of greed, cruelty, and oppression by continuing to show the country that our central commandments, to love God and love our neighbors, is our way forward.

On the day Christians celebrate as Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem in opposition to the greed, cruelty, and oppression of the Roman Empire on a

⁴ Eric C. Smith, [Earnestness and Mockery](#), *A Lovers Quarrel*. March 23, 2026.

donkey, a symbol of a just, humble leader who cares for the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the stranger. Christians will follow Jesus and embody the heart of our faith on Palm Sunday 2026. We will draw a contrast to the values guiding the actions of the current administration, as we embody and celebrate our love for God and love for our neighbors, regardless of where we come from or what we look like.

We proclaim a faith that centers love for our neighbors and rejects a politics rooted in greed and cruelty. To be a Christian is to choose love. Join us as we embody that love and celebrate the heart of our faith on Palm Sunday!"

As Dr. King said, "And if we will only make the right choice, we will be able to transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. If we will make the right choice, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we will but make the right choice, we will be able to speed up the day, all over America and all over the world, when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."⁵

May we move in the way of peace, as we resist, in the Holy Week procession.

Amen.

⁵ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "[Beyond Vietnam](#)," Delivered at The Riverside Church, New York City. April 4, 1967.