



## When the Nation Is Broken

*TEXT*  
*Mark 11:1–11; 12:13–17*

March 20, 2016 — Palm Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” The coin has Caesar’s image on it. You remember what’s created in the image of God, right? Therein lies the conflict.

I don’t know if we could have predicted that Jesus would say this when he rode into Jerusalem astride a donkey, but it sure makes sense of this Palm Sunday parade. I’ll come back to that.

We call this day Palm Sunday.

Jesus instructs his disciples to secure the donkey for his ride into Jerusalem. It’s not a grand job for disciples ... donkey detail. But sometimes it’s the little things we do to prepare the way for Jesus that make all the difference.

Jerusalem, that ancient city that reaches back to King David when he marched his armies into it, still today has armies marching those ancient streets — like you can’t have the city without the sounds of marching boots. The ancient Jews would say Jerusalem is God’s home address.

And ancient Rome would say that Jerusalem is just one more city occupied by Caesar’s power. Caesar was more than the emperor; Caesar was God. Wor-

ship who you wish, life was still defined in Jerusalem by the one who sits on the throne in Rome.

Jerusalem is the city where Jesus would be crucified. But the Romans didn’t invent the cross for Jesus. This is important. Rome was already very familiar with crosses. The cross was always there. It was a symbol of Roman power. But Jesus lifts this symbol of Roman power and reveals that it is actually a symbol of just how broken the nation really is.

If I understand this text, the point is not to suggest the Romans are unique. Any nation would have crucified Jesus. The cross, in some form or another, is part of every nation’s practice. Every nation crucifies him.

But first there is this parade. Parades are festive. People sing. People dance. People lift their children up on their shoulders to get a good view. For this parade, they placed palm branches on the ground as an expression of honor — creating something of a green carpet upon which Jesus would ride. And they shouted, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” They sang “Hosanna!”

It was a coronation, but an odd one, featuring humility and a different kind of power. Those in

his parade were peasants mostly. This parade did not feature the civic leaders of society. This was a parade of folks who society had passed by. To understand this parade, we need to remember the other parade.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan say that on this very day, in preparation for Passover, on the other side of Jerusalem, there was another parade — a military parade of Roman soldiers, led by Pontus Pilate. They were there to remind the people of Jerusalem who their rulers really were.

They describe that parade as “a [display] of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather, armor, helmets, weapons, banners, gold eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold ... [the sounds] of marching feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.”<sup>1</sup>

It was the power of the state on full display — a reminder that Caesar was not only king, but in the eyes of Rome, Caesar was God. Life would be defined by Caesar. Everyone in Jerusalem was a subject in Rome’s kingdom.

In contrast, Jesus rides into Jerusalem like a king, but he is not flanked by sword-carrying

freedom fighters; he is not followed by horses; he doesn't even ride a horse. He is followed by children singing "Hosanna!" There are peasants cutting palm branches and tossing them on the ground before his donkey.

Parents looked deep into the eyes of their children and said: "You remember this day, when at last God sent us a king who will save us. Don't forget this day. The world is changing today."

The people were part of this parade because they all knew the nation was broken. They wanted regime change. The powers that be had passed them by. The wealthy and the powerful got the benefits of life; the poor and powerless were pushed down and then blamed for not being more important.

Crucifixion was common. When the authority of Rome had been questioned, sometimes opponents were crucified by the hundreds, even the thousands. They would line the road. The nation was broken. And the people wanted regime change.

But Jesus rides in on a donkey, with no army, and tells them, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." They were subjects in Caesar's kingdom, so give to Caesar what is Caesar's. His image is on the coin. But more than that, give to God what belongs to God. You remember where the image of God is found, right?

But here is where it gets complex. Jesus does not bring regime change, but he does invade Caesar's kingdom. He does not bring the next kingdom, but he

does invade the current one with God's kingdom.

As a result, those who follow him are caught between two kingdoms — the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God — and they are not the same kingdom. We don't choose one or the other; we live in them both. But we must remember what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. And when the nation is broken — and every nation is broken — the place these two kingdoms meet is the cross.

Following Jesus is not first about getting us into heaven; it is about getting some heaven into us. When he says, "The kingdom of heaven has come near," it is an invasion of the kingdom of Caesar.

As followers of Jesus, we have dual citizenship. And dual citizenship means we have to navigate what it means to be a citizen of Caesar's empire and a citizen of God's kingdom. And that's not a romantic thing — because these two parades collide at the cross.

When Jesus is crucified, it is important to remember that he was not the first person to be crucified, nor the last. This was the way of this kingdom. What Jesus does is confront the brokenness of the nation.

Now the method might be unique to Rome; but the truth is, every nation would crucify Jesus because he confronts the evil in us.

So what does it mean, this parade? It means that the kingdom of God invades the kingdom of Caesar. What does that look like today?

Even a casual read of Jesus' life reveals that in his kingdom, you pay attention to those on the periphery. You pay attention to those who Caesar's parade passes by or runs over.

This is important: It is not because they are more important than others. It's not because they are loved by God more than others. Not that at all. We are called to pay attention to those on the periphery because that is where community has broken down. That is where communities demand healing.

You see, the difference between Caesar and God is that Caesar always has disposable folks. Caesar develops his own theology which identifies the people who matter and those who don't. Caesar doesn't have to hate; being apathetic will do just fine.

So the cross, which presents as the symbol of the nation's power, is really the symbol that the nation is broken. The cross is to take care of those people who don't fit in Caesar's kingdom.

Every nation has those problems because being community demands so much, even among those we love.

I was about 8 years old and had been with my family visiting my grandparents on my mother's side. We had been there a week or so, and my parents were going back to Alabama, where we lived at the time. I was staying for another week; I don't recall why. My grandparents got the short straw, I suppose.

What I remember is watching my parents back out of my grandparents' driveway, my

grandparents standing at the front door waving goodbye. They did not know I was nearby and could hear them. In my grandfather's South Carolina drawl, I heard him say, "Dahling, no dancing till they round the corner."

Community is hard, even with those we love the most. That's okay. What's not okay is when those with whom community is difficult become those for whom there is no place in the community. That's what a cross looks like.

We talk about it often here. There are too many children in this city who go to school, but have almost no chance of getting an education. There is little wonder what will happen to them and to the children they will have, and another generation will pass. Maybe it's time for our nation to begin putting the best schools in the worst neighborhoods.

I listened to Steve Kraske on *Up to Date* a couple weeks ago. Steve interviewed Mathew Desmond, a professor at Harvard. He has studied those in our country who are evicted from their homes because they can't pay their rent. His research reveals that in 2013, for 25 percent of the renting poor, their rent and utilities require 70 percent of their income — 70 percent!

In Jackson County, where I live, and some of you as well, between 2009 and 2013, there were 19 formal evictions every day.<sup>2</sup>

Of course there is a lesson in personal responsibility. We can't survive without taking responsibility. But when people work all day and rent requires 70 percent of take-home pay, that's a mod-

ern form of sharecropping. It's a sign of brokenness.

You might see the signs of brokenness in other places: poisoned water in Flint, Michigan; another 50 mass shootings in this country so far this year — two of them in Kansas. I don't know.

I have watched, with embarrassment and some disgust, the presidential game unfolding before us. They all promise that they have the plan, or at least the personality, to fix everything that has gone wrong in America. But they are not telling us the truth — because the problem is bigger than a candidate; bigger than a president; because our healing is not about one party winning.

The invasion of Jesus calls us to pay attention to different things: to pay attention to those on the bottom, to those on the periphery.

He teaches us that *morality* matters more than *profit*. Profit is a good and necessary thing; but for people of character, it is not the only thing.

He teaches us that *sacrifice* is not something to avoid, but is the mortar that holds communities together.

He teaches us to be *courageous*, so that our fears do not justify actions our better angels know are not justifiable.

He teaches that *maturity* is a spiritual fruit and should be embraced even when others around you live like selfish children.

He teaches us that *freedom* is less about our rights and more about our responsibilities.

So Jesus rides a donkey over palm branches, surrounded by those at the periphery — not

because they matter more; not because God loves them more, but because that is the place that community is broken.

And because so many of them had already been crucified, and because so many more were yet to be, he will ride all the way to the cross and be crucified. When his followers pay attention to those same folks that he paid attention to, that's what it looks like to give to the nation what belongs to the nation that we love; but also to give to God what belongs to the God that we love.

It is so hard. But it is not impossible.

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<sup>1</sup>Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (2006), p. 3

<sup>2</sup>*Up to Date: KCUR*, March 9, 2016, "Evicted: Profit and Poverty in the American City"

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).