

Christ's Theater of Liberation
Isaiah 50: 4-9a | Mark 11: 1-11
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One of the many moments I miss sharing with you happens during our communion liturgy. It's at the conclusion of the *Sanctus*—the song where we “lift our voices in thanksgiving and praise.” As we sing that second and final “Hosanna in the highest!” Erica hits the ceiling with some otherworldly note, and in that moment I feel . . . *transported, transformed*. I can't quite put words to it, but the space around me and within me are just different.

It's particularly striking when I'm presiding over communion. As I look out onto the congregation, the room itself seems to lift and draw us closer to one another. The boundaries beneath, above, and between us seem to fade away. In some ways, I've never felt more connected to the whole congregation as I do in that moment, as we prepare our hearts to receive the gifts offered at the Lord's table.

And that's what good liturgy does. It changes us. It marks a communal turning within our hearts and within our lives. That it is a *shared* moment is significant, because I arrive to these rituals as “me” and leave them as part of new “we”—as part of this body.

We live in a world baptized in the waters of “me.” Fellow-feeling seems to erode with wave upon wave of *personal responsibility and individual freedom and self-reliance and pulling myself by my bootstraps and rugged individualism*.

We need rituals that help us remember who *we* are. We need songs that help us reach notes we could never sing alone. We need sacred moments that set us apart from this *me-drenched* world and mark us for the work of solidarity and service—that is, for building the kin-dom of God.

We need these shared moments – in song, at table, in prayer, on the streets – to weave us closer to one another and expand our sense of what is possible.

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And yet with Jesus it seems that our glorious ascent to what is possible often comes packaged within a searing critique of what is probable. And too often our ritualizing—now millennia removed from Christ's context—can miss the irony and subversive intentionality of the acts Jesus invites us into.

Breathtakingly gorgeous as that culminating note of the *Sanctus* is, our Hosannas reach to the heavens . . . only to meet a messiah riding a jackass *so short* that Jesus' feet (in all likelihood) are dragging the ground alongside him.

Whether we understand Hosanna as adulation; whether we link it with its etymological root, meaning “Save, please!”—in either case when we shout (or sing!) Hosanna today we join a scene that is more comical than triumphant.

Jesus here is more court jester than king. And while I, too, appreciate the palm-waving and Hosanna-shouting rituals that mark this day, let us make no mistake: by joining in this procession we are dignifying indignity. We are making a spectacle. And we are thumbing our nose at the empire. And that's just the way Jesus would want it.

Christ's "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem is street theater. It's organized protest. It's empire in drag. Jesus subversively dons the garb of his Roman occupiers to challenge their power. He draws on the prophetic tradition to make a mockery of the "salvation" offered by Rome's military might.

So, yes, it's ironic, even comical. But it's also deeply intentional.

As commentaries on this passage will note, Mark spends much more time on Jesus' careful preparation for this procession than on the procession itself.

This is one of Jesus' more pointedly political acts. And I think it's pretty solid evidence for the characterization of Jesus as an organizer. He knew precisely where the disciples would find a colt, and exactly what they should say to retrieve it. Jesus even knew how to calm the colt before mounting it.

He knew the symbolic power of this creature—the connotations of humility and peacemaking it carried. Jesus knew the scripture and what prophetic allusions his donkey ride from the east would evoke.

Perhaps more than at any other point in Christ's ministry, there's nothing left to chance. There's nothing random or improvised. Jesus *meant* to make *a statement*—about empire, about violence, about salvation, about messianic prophecy, and about power and oppression.

What miracle of forethought! What planning divine! Jesus knew exactly what he was doing, and had intentionally cultivated relationships to make this subversive procession possible. He was plugged into grassroots networks with those who shared (and were willing to help enact) his vision.

Riding into the final chapter of his ministry, Jesus challenges the theater of empire—of violence and domination—with a spectacle of his own. He meticulously organizes **a theater of liberation**.

As with any good protest, not everyone there was part of the planning process. Surely many who participated in this procession were drawn there by word-of-mouth. But the spectacle was so great (so asinine, we might say—pun intended) as to turn their attention away from the military parade of Rome toward something else entirely.

Ironic. Intentional. And invitational.

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Here we are. Palms in hand. The crowd is growing and while the sight before us seems ridiculous, it's unsettling something in our minds. It's prompting questions we hadn't considered before. It's

dislodging assumptions we've taken for granted. It's making space for possibilities we hadn't yet dared to imagine.

Do we join in?

In a world where violence rules, where processions of power-over go unchallenged, the cost of participating in this street theater seems rather high. But I can't deny that in this ridiculous act Jesus has interrupted my sense of what is "normal."

The cost of joining in seems high, yes, but the longer I sit with this procession, the cost of just accepting what we have become accustomed to seems even higher.

What does it mean that in the very moment that whispers of "back to normal" begin to circulate, the United States returns to its parade of mass shootings?

What can we say of our ethical and political priorities when in the state of Georgia it's far easier to get a gun than to vote?

What does it say about this state that on the anniversary of HB2 the North Carolina legislature introduces a bill that targets trans *children*?

What can we say of our home town when in Chapel Hill property owners and developers can get approval for whatever rezoning they want just by threatening to evict our neighbors from their homes?

And that can we make of a nation that will accept seemingly endless blood sacrifice on the altar of white supremacy over reckoning with its enduring grip on the soul, systems, and imagination of this country?

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Jesus' performance of empire in drag is comical, yes, but its message couldn't be more serious. You see, drag shows exaggerate gender to help us see (and challenge) the gender roles and norms we unconsciously perform all the time.

Similarly, the purpose of *this* spectacle, of Jesus' theater of liberation, is to put in stark contrast the world we've grown to accept and the world Christ knows is possible. It exaggerates and challenges the hold that empire, violence, domination, and other worldly powers have over us—the subtle ways we are baptized and ritualized into *their* hopes for the world.

Like the best drag performers, Jesus knows that to change our actions he must first enliven our imaginations. He invites us into this street theater, this drag show, this protest, this ritual, this spectacle—yes, to liberate us from the constraints of this world—but also so that we can try on, move around in, and embody other possibilities.

Now that Christ has caught our attention, I wonder whether and how United Church might join in this ridiculous procession.

As we begin to imagine and plan for regathering this community in person again, I wonder what spectacle we might embrace to challenge the empire's hold on our imaginations today. *What kind of possibilities might we enact within our own little theater of liberation?*

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But should we choose to join in and shout our Hosannas, we cannot do so without counting the cost. It seems that no sooner are we invited into this Palm Sunday procession than we are swept into Holy Week. For the end of this particular procession's end is, *well*, rather anticlimactic—and soon enough we will have to bear witness to the spectacle of Christ's passion.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a line in the sand. We can either join in Rome's military parade, assent to its normalization of violence, or we join in the procession of Christ's solidarity with those suffering *even unto death*.

Christ's is an unarmed protest, and like the best forms of such protest theater, it may cost us more than just our dignity.

But consider the cost of assenting to normalcy. Consider the cost of joining in the violent processions of the powerful, and the attendant rituals that lift "me" above "we."

Ultimately, Christ's theater of liberation is rooted in God's solidarity with those seeking to be freed from grip of violence. Christ both embodies and models God's love for us. It is an important reminder as we begin Holy Week that our sacred call to not to yield to death and violence but to resist them.

I must confess that, caught here between the palms in the passion, I don't think I would have the courage to proclaim Hosanna alone. I am eternally grateful that rituals like Palm Sunday bind us one to another. Because I need Erica's voice (and yours too!) as I reach for the courage to shout and sing Hosanna myself.

So let's get organized! Put on a drag show—a little street theater—and thumb our nose at the powers of this world. Let's break open our imaginations together even as we bear the cost of solidarity *with* one another. Each spectacle we plan might just upend a little corner of the empire, making room for God's wondrous love to occupy this world instead.

Amen.