

A Different Kind of Power

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Oleksandr Antonyuk

Preaching on:
Matthew 11:1–11

The rise of Christianity is just about the most improbable origin story imaginable. The biggest religion in the world today and the biggest in all of human history was founded by a poor, peasant rabbi who was a part of a tiny backwater religion, which had been conquered and subjugated by one of history's

greatest empires—Rome. And that poor, peasant, Jewish teacher was crucified by the Roman Empire—a contemptible, shameful public execution intended to utterly wipe out his legacy. And within 300 years of his death on that Roman cross, Jesus the Christ would become the God of that empire. And the image of him, staked out and dying on their cross, would become ubiquitous and holy to them. How was such a reversal possible?

It must have been God's will. Well, sure. But that doesn't tell us anything about God's technique, God's style. The thing about being omnipotent is, you always have plenty of options. To be honest with you, I'm not so sure about thinking of God as omnipotent—ALL POWERFUL. If I were all powerful, I think I might behave a little differently than God does. If God is all powerful, I think it's safe to say that God isn't a showoff about it. And, in fact, we can see God, the almighty God, beginning to show contempt for what we humans think of us as power.

How would a God who is all powerful, but who is coming to loathe the expression of that "power"—violence, war, subjugation, oppression, exploitation—how would that God behave? Perhaps if you were all powerful, but you had come to regret what power is and how it works, you might decide to redefine what power is—to redefine yourself. Maybe you would come down from "on high," enter the world a lowly peasant, and conquer an empire not through a decisive military victory but with nothing more than the persistent power of your symbolism and the gradual spread of your love.

In a world dominated by the fist and the whip and the legion, perhaps you too would wield healing, compassion, and forgiveness as the truest forms of strength. And where power raised an army, rode a war horse, and took itself very seriously indeed, perhaps you too would call disciples, ride a baby donkey, and mock the very power the world has come to believe that you are.

And so we come to our parade this morning, Palm Sunday, the entry into Jerusalem. First, you have to understand that it's very possible that on that very day and perhaps that very hour that Jesus rode into Jerusalem down the Mount of Olives that Pontius Pilate, on the other side of town, was also entering Jerusalem in force, on an armored horse, surrounded by legions of soldiers in a stark display of intimidation and (as always) with the inherent threat of violence—you people had better not get out of hand at this year's Passover. Jesus' parade was not just different than Pilate's, it was a mockery of Roman power and all "power" that lives and dies by the sword.

On May 26, 2007, members of a white supremacist hate group held a march and rally in a public park in Knoxville, Tennessee. The counter protesters were sick and tired of the Antifa tactics sometimes used to shout down (and sometimes beat down) white supremacists. It felt like they were getting sucked into the very display of violent power that they were wanting to oppose. How do we still stand up against them while offering an alternative to them?

Instead of meeting anger and hate with more anger and hate, they decided to meet them with humor. And so the Coup Clutz Clowns were born. When the neo-Nazis marched, the clowns marched with

them, only they made sure to goose step in their floppy red shoes. And when the neo-Nazis shouted, "White Power!" the clowns pretended like they couldn't hear them very well. The neo-Nazis shouted louder, and then the clowns understood. They started throwing handfuls of flour into the air and shouted "White Flour!" Some women arrived in their wedding dresses and corrected them, "No, No, No, not 'White Flour,' 'Wife Power!'" A clown on stilts with a tiny little handpump camp shower started spraying water onto the clowns below. They all tried to squeeze under the tiny stream of water, but there wasn't nearly enough room. "Tight Shower!" screamed the clown on stilts. "Tight Shower!" And the neo-Nazis decided to go home.

Now Jesus wasn't just clowning around on Palm Sunday. He was, I think, deadly serious. His "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem was a mockery of Roman pomp and power, but it was also a true and serious display of God's new definition of power: humility, sacrifice, the commitment to peace, and the certain knowledge that "power's" greatest threat—humiliating torture and death—could be converted into the greatest expression of commitment, love, and transformation that the world had ever known.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem on a baby donkey, he is locking on to his fate. There can be very little doubt that he knew that mounting that tiny donkey and riding down that hill would lead him irrevocably to the cross. There is no turning back now. He knew where his actions would take him—to the cross and to a holy transformation of the very idea of power. He was utterly rejecting the traditional hope (an almost hopeless hope) of a violent, revolutionary messiah who would raise an army, ride a war horse, call down the legions from heaven, and defeat Rome in battle.

If God is all powerful, couldn't God have done it easily? Of course! When I read my Bible don't I read many stories about God using power in just this way? Doesn't God use death and suffering to humble the proud and punish the wicked? Yes! Doesn't God use war and violence and subjugation to win territory for God's chosen people? Yes! But in Jesus Christ, beginning with Christmas and concluding with Palm Sunday and Good Friday, God is choosing to no longer conquer the world from on high. Instead, God will transform the world and all those on it from within.

As Christians, do we understand what Jesus has taught us? Do we understand that the Kingdom of Heaven that we were expecting from on high has actually arrived as the Kingdom of God within us? Do we understand that the power we are still most enamored by (the power of coercion through force and domination), is no longer the greatest power in this world? Because we still cling to it, looking to it for assurance and security, forgetting that every empire in history has fallen, that every wall ever built has been breached, that every army ever raised has ultimately been scattered.

Do we understand? And are we willing, as we wave our palm branches and shout our Hosannas, are we willing to explore in our lives, in our world, the kind of power Jesus demonstrates? The power of the Mahatma Ghandis and the Mother Teresas and the Martin Luther King Jr's and the Dorothy Days and the Nelson Mandelas of this world? The kind of power that is far too weak to conquer the world but is the only kind of power strong enough to transform the world.

What would it look like to expand upon that true and great power in your life? What would it feel like to loosen your grip on this world, on your life, and give yourself to this world and to the people around you instead? What if your greatest fear wasn't dying, but was not taking the necessary risks in this life to become everything God intends you to be—no longer frightened and clinging and cruel, but confident and expansive and full of love? By this power, Jesus and a few disciples conquered the greatest empire in history! What could we achieve if we were willing to follow him?