

“March of the Disinherited”  
Palm Sunday, March 29, 2026  
Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 21:1-11

What do you think is happening in this story about Jesus entering Jerusalem? What’s he trying to accomplish by having his followers bring him a donkey and lay their cloaks on it so he can ride on its back? It’s a very powerful demonstration of humility, first of all. Riding a donkey, as opposed to a horse or in a chariot or carriage, would have been understood to be a sign of weakness and poverty. So that reference Matthew uses about Israel’s king riding on a donkey fits really well with what Jesus is doing. Unfortunately, the reference sort of breaks down when Matthew includes a colt, portraying Jesus riding two animals at once. It’s probably a mistranslation of a passage from Zechariah. But the point is the same. Humility is the main quality of Israel’s king, not power and arrogance.

So, we have in this story Jesus entering the city during a festival as people are gathering for Passover, inviting the crowds to see in him someone they can identify with. Because those people were truly humble; they were poor. They were what one of my favorite authors, Howard Thurman, called “the disinherited.” These are the people Jesus wants to reach. They’re the people the servant in Isaiah means when it says, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.” The weary are those who have been left out, those who are kept down, the disinherited of the world.

For the speaker in Isaiah those people were living in exile in Babylon. Their lives were entirely controlled by the rulers of that country and they had no freedom of movement or behavior that wasn’t given to them by their captors. As Walter Brueggemann points out in his commentary on Isaiah, the word to the weary is the promise of homecoming, of return to Israel. But it’s possible not everyone wanted to hear it. It’s not clear in this passage who is doing the insulting and spitting and striking. Maybe it’s the Babylonian authorities, but it could be the exiled Israelites who don’t want someone rocking the boat and attracting a lot of attention for saying the wrong thing, or filling folks’ heads with a lot of pipedreams and fantasies.

That’s always the danger when someone offers hope to the disinherited. We hear a hint of that in Matthew’s gospel when it describes the turmoil Jesus’ entry causes. We can certainly hear it in Isaiah’s words as the servant described there steels himself to punishment, setting his face like flint. In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that inspired my sermon title, Howard Thurman recalls his life growing up in the Jim Crow south with a grandmother who had been born into slavery. He says in those conditions, where the masses of people are cut off from access to power or resources, the basic question they face is: resist or not resist?

He describes those options in rich detail that I can’t really cover here. But when it comes to non-resistance, he says, “It is the profound capitulation to the powerful, because it means the yielding of oneself to that which, deep within, one recognizes as being unworthy. It makes for a strategic loss of self-respect.” Living in that condition may be safer in the moment physically, but it does far more damage emotionally and generationally than resistance ever could. But not all resistance has the same value. Violent resistance, especially for the disinherited, will only

cause pain and loss. Jesus offers the way of non-violent resistance by riding a donkey and walking humbly, yet never giving in to the forces of hate and retribution that motivate those in power.

By riding a donkey into Jerusalem amidst the cries of Hosanna, which means “save us,” from the crowds, Jesus demonstrates what true power looks like and how hatred and cruelty are overcome. He does this from a spiritual perspective, but always with a material effect. The Church has a fascination and interest in keeping Jesus’ influence on a spiritual level. But Thurman makes this observation, he writes, “I do not ignore the theological and metaphysical interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. But the underprivileged everywhere have long since abandoned any hope that this type of salvation deals with the crucial issues by which their days are turned into despair without consolation. The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.” He then adds, crucially, “That [Christianity] became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus.”

Jesus is up to something in Jerusalem that has real, material purpose. This demonstration is meant to reveal a new possibility of hope for people living in despair. This is the march of the disinherited. He gathers as many as he can find, people whose backs are against the wall, people who see no future for themselves and their families except continual struggling and suffering. That’s all they envision for themselves and for their descendants. What else can they expect? It’s all they’ve ever known.

People have come and gone promising to rescue them. They’ve seen leaders rise and fight only to be destroyed by the power of their oppressors or the collaboration of their religious authorities. Armed resistance after armed resistance has only led to more bloodshed and tighter control. Jesus, riding on his donkey, teaching a gospel of compassion and generosity, calling for justice without violence, offers them a new path. He offers them a new hope.

But it comes with a cost. As Isaiah points out, when you comfort the weary with a word of hope, you can expect a backlash from the powers that be, possibly from among the weary themselves. Strangely, the message Jesus brings can be especially hard to hear by the very ones it’s meant to inspire. In his book, Thurman describes Jesus’ message to be simple and direct: instead of waiting around for God’s kingdom to come, Jesus teaches God’s kingdom is within us. It’s within us because we are all God’s children. Thurman tells the story of learning this from his grandmother who was born into slavery. He writes, “When I was a youngster, this was drilled into me by my grandmother. The idea was given to her by a certain slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves. How everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when, in her recital, she would come to the triumphant climax of the minister: ‘You—you are not [chattel]. You—you are not slaves. You are God’s children!’”

Most of us can’t imagine how powerful a message that is. Yet so many of us, even today, walk around in denial of that simple fact. This is what Jesus means to teach the crowds as he enters the city in humility and weakness. He tells them, “I am one of you. You are just like me.”

He's not telling them to idolize him or elevate him or in any way worship him. He comes to them, he comes to us, as one of us.

The question we face isn't to resist or not resist the powers of injustice and oppression around us. Our question is to accept or deny Jesus' claim that we are God's children. If we deny it, then we can go on ignoring the mistreatment of people around us who are targeted because of their immigration status or their gender identity or their religion or heritage or skin color. We can go along with all the imagined conflicts and concocted divisions people leading our government use as excuses to arrest and detain and imprison people they consider inferior. But if we accept Jesus' claim, if we accept that we are God's children, then all those people become our sisters and brothers because if we are God's children, then so are they.

In his demonstration of humility and weakness, Jesus is challenging us to join him. He's inviting us to come and follow him on the path of compassion and hope. We know where his teaching will lead. We know that by offering hope to the disinherited, the powers of the world will take him to the cross. The spitting and striking and pulling of the beard described by the prophet is waiting for anyone who dares to comfort the weary with a word. But if we don't accept what he offers, then what are we left with? What kind of a world will it become if we hide ourselves from God? Jesus is offering us a chance to claim our true nature, to rise up and be God's children, to join the disinherited on the march to freedom.

Our journey through Lent is coming to an end. Our time of prayer and contemplation and self-examination has brought us to the moment of decision. Will you follow him on the path of compassion and hope, no matter the cost or will you continue to wander in the wilderness, blind to God's kingdom and denying God's claim on you? The world is waiting for an answer.

Amen