

“The King of Glory” based on Mark 15:1-39 and John 12:12-16

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 24, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

On my first Sunday here at Shelby Presbyterian Church, Carol Ann asked me a series of questions for you all to get to know me a little. One of those questions was, “What is your favorite song?” I took the easy way out and answered with my favorite hymn. It’s the one we sang this morning while everyone processed in with Psalms, “The King of Glory.”

At St. Mary of the Snow, my childhood church, it was played once a year – every single Palm Sunday. I looked forward to it every year, and so, when I got to Absecon, NJ, to my surprise, it was in our Worship & Praise hymnal, along with a few other “new” hymns, meaning ones written in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, that I loved. I was so excited to have the opportunity to use it every year.

So, now that I’m here, I’m torturing you all with hearing it every single year. I hope you don’t mind that we’ve repeated it now. Maybe some of the young people today will be like me and remember its rhythm and melody, and imagine like I did back then, how cool it would sound, as a heavy metal tune...Bruce? (He said “no”) C’mon man.

But beyond the fact that I love the song, it really is the right song for Palm Sunday, during which we begin with Palms to celebrate Jesus’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem, then move on to the Passion of Jesus – his conviction, suffering, and crucifixion. The infectious tune carries this movement, reminding us first who Jesus is: The King of Glory is Emmanuel, God with us, the promised of ages. The song does more than tell us about miracles, it performs one itself – managing to rhyme village and illness¹ – and then it reminds us he is both savior and our brother. He took upon himself the sins of the nation, it says, then moving to the Passion that this King conquered sin and death, to share with us God’s space – the vision of heaven – God’s life for us.

The King of Glory comes, the nation rejoices. Open the gates before him, lift up your voices. He is the King of Glory, but he does not have the Glory we associate with a King. He does not ride into the city on a horse, a symbol of power, war, and strength. He rides in on a donkey, a service animal used in everyday life, a symbol of peace. The people cry out “Hosanna,” which means “save us.” “Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed be the King of Israel!” He came to them at the feat of the Passover, when the people celebrated being delivered from the Empire of Egypt, now they pray for deliverance, from Rome.

In Mark’s gospel, which we have been reading this year, there is a lot of spiritual warfare. Now, it’s easy for us in modern times to gloss over that stuff. It’s easy to think we are rational and dismiss these stories as mental illness, but that cheapens the real battle many people face with actual mental illnesses. Then it also invites the reverse claim that somehow mental illness is possession, which is also wrong. So, do not be tempted to conflate mental illness with demons, in either direction, or else you will miss what is going on. So, take a moment to consider what is happening.

Throughout Mark’s gospel, the demons and evil spirits have recognized Jesus as, “The Holy One of Israel.” They have wondered why the “Son of the Most High,” is even bothering with them. As the book of James points out, even the demons know God is one, and shudder. And so, here is the Most High God present to them as a human being, casting demons out of humans, undermining their power.

¹ Credit for joke to Fr. James Martin and Stephen Colbert, “America: The Jesuit Review.”

Again, we don't like to think of these things in 2024, but the end result of not thinking about these things, is that turn our battles inward against ourselves, thinking we are inherently "good" or "evil." Then we mark one another as "good" or "evil," based on ideology, race, gender identity, status, wealth, or anything else that divides us.

By the time we get to this moment at the end of Mark's gospel, the tone changes. Now, we see powers of sin and death on full display – as fear and envy take center stage. There is actual demon possession in Mark's gospel, but then, even more sinister, is what he shows us at the end in the effect of sin without possession. This is the effect of seeking earthly glory and honor, preserving it, and the power of shame, which can be more powerful than a demon.

All of these have the power to destroy human life, human prosperity, human faith, love, and hope. The chief priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees have delivered Jesus out of envy, but also out of fear for their status, their honor, which means that to raise themselves up, Jesus must be shamed.

The irony that comes to a head in this passage is that God, the Lord, and creator of all things, has made God's-self vulnerable, choosing to share fully in the limits of a human person. The powers and principalities of this world, those unseen forces Mark writes about must have been salivating at the chance, perhaps, to destroy Yahweh. The idea of the Most High God, the only true God and Creator, taking on human form, living as we live, and dying for us, was hidden in plain sight in the history of Israel. It was hidden even to the angels and heavenly beings.

The irony continues to grow as Jesus does not fight back – something that baffles Pilate. What person would be silent when facing accusations that will lead to death? Pilate has no reason to execute Jesus, as he has made no threat to Rome, but don't be fooled into thinking that Pilate is somehow innocent. Mark doesn't have the washing his hands thing, but Pilate is by no means meant to be a sympathetic figure. If Pilate wanted to release him, he could have released him. The soldiers could have dealt with the mob, but admittedly that could get messy, so Pilate instead, tries to bring himself honor from the mob. He offers to release a prisoner, to show Rome can be merciful, and they ask for Barabbas, which means "son of a father." It means someone like us.

Now Pilate has shown mercy and still gets to exercise vengeance. He still gets to execute the power of shame by putting Jesus on a cross for a slow, painful, and humiliating death. Make no mistake, this was a death of humiliation to the highest degree. First being scourged meant being whipped to the point of death, and then the soldiers put clothes on him, and then took them off, ripping open the scabs that were forming as his body tried to heal. They put purple on him – to represent the color of royalty. They put a crown of thorns on him. They anointed him with their spit. They pretended to worship him.

Then they led him out and when they crucified him naked on that cross, they tried to give him wine and myrrh to maybe lessen the pain a little, but he refused. They put on him the accusation, the warning to all watching: The King of the Judeans. If you wanted to be King of Judea, you were opposing Rome, and the warning is that this is what happens to would be pretenders to Roman rule. Then the chief priests who turn one of their own over to Rome voice the sentiments of evil powers by accusing him of being powerless to save himself. "Let him come down now from the cross, so we might see and have faith." How often do we test God in this way? I'll believe, I'll have faith, if first you show me. You do what I want. Be my personal magician God and then I'll believe.

When Jesus cries out, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani!” it sounds as if he’s lost all hope. “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” But this cry of dereliction, of despair, is not the end, but the beginning as Jesus points to what is hidden in plain sight. Namely, it is that Psalm 22 describes this moment, more or less, and the psalm ends in redemption and hope. Evil believes it has won. But even in this moment, before the Resurrection, Mark tells us that evil has not won even this battle, as the temple veil is torn, removing the barrier that separated God from the people.

Just as the heavens were ripped open at Jesus’s baptism, now the temple veil is ripped. And Mark uses the same verb to connect these two moments for us. It’s a word we still use when we get divided from people we are naturally close to. We use it when pieces that are meant to fit are torn apart.

Beloved, in Jesus the Most High God, the Lord, Yahweh of Israel, sent the Son, fully one with the Father, to share in our humanity, to live as we live, in all of our limits, and to die for us. I pointed out the way Mark shows the other powers not to challenge you and make you dismiss me as some “kook,” but because this is why the crucifixion is not God deciding Jesus needs to die. This is not God torturing his kid. This is because God sends God’s self in the Son and knows the world will not accept him.

Foreknowledge is not intention. God knows but sends Jesus anyway. Maybe the people will reject that envy and fear, reject the modes of honor and shame. Maybe the people will not do it. But God in the Father, Son and Spirit also knows that even if the powers of this world could not handle having God rule in their midst that these powers can be defeated.

And so, the powers of sin and death were brought to bear on Jesus, who knew no sin, and yet became sin. He was hanged on a Roman cross for us, to die for us. Next week we will mark that even after the powers celebrated killing him, the tomb could not hold him, and he rose for us, opening up life for us.

Beloved, as you ponder this story, remember that in this world we have trouble – trial, friction, and things that throw us off – but Jesus says, “Fear not. I have overcome the world.” We need not see our neighbor or any human as our enemy, but recognize that they are image bearers of our God. Our struggle is not with them. We can resist the powers and the structures of this world that continue to place people in oppression, in danger, and devalue people’s humanity and life. We can step in as Jesus did, not by fighting with weapons and fists flailing, but with love and caring – taking on the pain of another as Jesus does for us on the cross.

This is because we know our God will win. That is the whole point. We can have that confidence and trust in God’s power to be with us. That’s why this is good news. That’s why this sad moment is good news. I think it fitting that of all the different forms of crucifixion in the ancient world that Rome chose the cross beam, because there is Jesus with his arms outstretched ready to embrace you in love. This is for you to turn back to at any time and help others to turn to that welcoming embrace. This is why Jesus is the King of Glory. Amen.