

Sermon – Matthew 27:11-54  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Palm/Passion Sunday – Year A  
29 March 2026

### “One King”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. That escalated quickly. From Sunday’s cheers of “Hosanna” to Friday’s demands to “Let him be crucified!” From a triumphal entry proclaiming Jesus as king to the mocking, twisted crown of thorns. From the adoring crowds to the abandonment by all except two bandits who couldn’t get away. Even God has left him, as far as Jesus can tell in the moment. What went wrong, for palm branches to yield to a cross?
2. Perhaps, like me, you remember a time when Palm Sunday was Palm Sunday and that was that. The events of the Passion were left for Good Friday. We children would parade with palms and go home in a buoyant mood. Why the change? There are practicalities to be considered. Not everyone will attend worship on Good Friday, after all, so it’s good to get the message in now. More importantly, as is often the case, what seems new is actually not. Including the Passion on Palm Sunday recaptures a practice from centuries past. But more than the practical and the historical is the truth that the triumphal entry is too easy to misunderstand apart from what unfolds on the Friday following. Because maybe nothing went wrong at all.
3. The crowds get it right on Sunday, but as is so often the case, they don’t understand what it all means. Yes, Jesus is the king, the Son of David come among them. But for what does he come into Jerusalem? For conquest? For

war? To meet the power of the Roman occupier with power of his own, raising up his own legions to cast them out and set himself in their place? This, no doubt, is what the people are hoping for, and who can blame them, suffer as they have? When faced with one kind of king, it's hard to imagine something different. Jesus was born under the rule of Augustus, who styled himself a "son of god" and established the Pax Romana. By the time Jesus enters Jerusalem, Tiberius is emperor, with his name and picture on the money to prove it. Tiberius was a deeply paranoid person. Ever more reclusive, he let mid-level functionaries like Pilate and Herod enact cruelty and terror on his behalf. His rule was the sort in which killing innocent people like Jesus was just part of the cost of doing business, as was letting actual criminals like Barabbas go free. He expanded the peace of Rome, but it was hardly peaceful. The Pax Romana was what we might call "peace through strength," in which Rome was often at war elsewhere and the so-called peace at home was maintained by the unrelenting crushing of dissent by soldiers and centurions who were, you know, just doing their job. This was the peace on earth given by the emperors who claimed to be gods. As the scholar Luis Menéndez-Antuña points out, the Roman emperors were seen as godlike precisely because they ruled with violence and showed no mercy, endlessly taking it out on anyone seen as their enemy. It is, of course, a story that has outlived the Roman Empire in too many places, too many ways.

4. And Jesus? Jesus comes to show the whole thing for the lie that it is. The actual Son of God empties himself. Pours himself out. Lets this world have its way with him. Meets hate with love. Goes to the cross willingly to reveal that God is the God of open arms. Dies to undo the power of empire and to forgive us for our participation in it. Dies to unbind us from the power of evil, without and within, and frees us for new ways of life and peace. Dies to undo death and silence the drumbeats of war forever. Dies for us to show that grace and mercy, not terror and vengeance, are the ways of our God. Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday so that Good Friday can happen. And we,

with the centurion, look upon Christ and his cross and see what the true King looks like. What went wrong? No. By the grace of God, Christ comes to finally make things right. There's more, of course. Much more. But that's for another Sunday. Come back next week. For now, let us marvel at the cross and worship Christ, the King who comes to us in the way we need him most. Amen.