

Sit Up

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Palm Sunday, March 24, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 11:1-11](#)

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A demonstration on the National Mall today created a tense standoff between government officials and members of a cult led by a self-styled messiah who goes by the name of Jesus. In an unauthorized incursion into the air space around the Capital, Jesus and a few of his close associates navigated a hot air balloon, which they later referred to as “Air Farce One,” to a landing on the mall where a large group of his followers met him with a Volkswagen Beetle, which he rode to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in a mock ticker-tape parade created by his followers throwing confetti. Once at the memorial, Jesus took to the steps where Martin Luther King famously delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech to preach a sermon about what he called the dangerous mix of religion and politics today, including comments about the National Cathedral, which some took to be threat to destroy the building.

Officials at the National Cathedral issued a statement which read, “while we support free speech and diverse religious expression, we cannot dismiss threats to this venerable national treasure and will pursue prosecution to the fullest extent of the law.” National Park Service Police report that in dispersing the crowd they were unable to apprehend the leadership. They are working with the FBI to investigate who was responsible for the demonstration and expect to make arrests by the end of the week.

Ian Lynch,¹ shared that “news story” with a bunch of colleagues and, when I heard it, I knew it would be the perfect opener to today’s sermon. I’ve been preaching about Palm Sunday for 37 years and, as Diana Butler Bass says, Holy Week keep coming around like “liturgical clockwork.”² And, while I wonder what I might say *this year*, like Bass, I often find myself singing the Palm Sunday song from *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

Hosanna, hey sanna, sanna sanna ho

Sanna, hey, sanna hosanna

Hey J.C, J.C, won't you smile at me?

Sanna ho, sanna hey, Superstar.

Maybe that dates me.

This musical setting encourages a mistranslation of “Hosanna.” The joyfulness of the music makes the word sound like it’s another word of praise, similar to “Alleluia!” “But hosanna and alleluia are *not* the same. *Hōsanná* is a transliteration of the Hebrew term (*hōsî-âh-nā*) meaning ‘*Oh, save now!*’ or ‘*Please save!*’

¹ The “news report” by Ian Lynch was shared in a sermon discussion thread on [worshipdesignstudio.com](#).

² Diana Butler Bass, “Hosanna, not Alleluia,” *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-709> (posted 2 April 2023; accessed 23 March 2024).

“The crowd at the procession wasn’t shouting praises to Jesus. The crowd was begging Jesus to save them.”³ Knowing that will, I hope, make you wonder, “Save them from what?”

18 years ago, two of my biblical scholar heroes, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, published a little book called *The Last Week*. It starts off with this powerful explanation of what’s going on:

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30.... One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers.... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Idumea, Judea, and Samaria, entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers.

Jesus’s procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate’s proclaimed the power of empire. The two processions embody the central conflict of the week that led to Jesus’s crucifixion.⁴

While I don’t know what evidence Crossan and Borg have for claiming the processions happened on the same day, I wouldn’t put it past Jesus to schedule his procession for the same day that Pilate brought in his show of force. It is clear that Jesus’ procession was a political act. It was designed to get people to *sit up* and take notice. It was no accident that Jesus rooted this protest in his faith tradition. He knew he could get the people to see the vision by acting it out for them. Jesus’ procession purposefully utilized images from “a prophecy from Zechariah. In the Hebrew scriptures, Zechariah envisioned a *humble* king who arrives in Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt. That king will end all war. No more chariots, warhorses, or battle-bows. This king commands peace.

“Of course, Pontius Pilate wasn’t a king of peace. He commanded an army on behalf of Caesar.”⁵ And while he thought he was using the army to “keep the peace,” it was a negative peace at best: the absence of “trouble.” There was no justice in *Pax Romana*, and so it was no real peace. Pilate’s army was there to make sure the Jews didn’t cause any trouble for their Roman rulers during the holy days of Passover – a holiday that celebrates liberation from an oppressive empire. “As his procession made its way to the city gate, most likely no one cheered him. The crowds hated and feared him.”⁶

Bass suggests that there could have been paid supporters “sent out to shout *Ave Pilate – Hail Pilate* – as he entered – to soothe his imperial ego. Maybe a few powerful people in Jerusalem actually approved of him, or wanted something from him, and shouted their praise. Chances are, however, the road to the west gate was relatively deserted as the Romans approached. The only sounds were the dreaded clomp, clomp of armored horses and chariot wheels traversing the cobblestones. Pilate, in regal splendor, probably wanted to be home in his seaside villa instead of here, with the unruly Jews.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 2.

⁵ Bass, *op. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

“Meanwhile, at the eastern gate, Jesus’ noisy supporters were crying out *Hosanna! Save us! Please save us now!* They weren’t asking for some sort of spiritual salvation, for a place in heaven, or for eternal life. They wanted to be saved from Pilate, from the legion entering the other gate, from Caesar, and that faux peace of Roman swords.”⁷

I see a deep and disturbing parallel to the faux peace of Roman swords in the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States. And as I move into this next section of my sermon, let me say that I don’t want to preach it. Christian nationalism is deeply connected to the Republican party and I have no desire to get partisan. But Christian nationalism – regardless of what political party they’re hitching their wagon to – is such a threat to both Christianity and American democracy, I feel compelled to speak.

The United States is not and never has been a Christian nation. The United States is shaped by Christianity, especially by Protestantism. Both of those statements are true. Christian nationalism wants to make the first of those statements false.

In general, Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities. The danger here is that by merging Christian and American identities, both Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy are distorted. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. And Christian nationalism almost always overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy, racial subjugation, and patriarchy.

Here’s how “Christians Against Christian Nationalism” define Christian nationalism: “Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life. Christian nationalism contends that America has been and should always be distinctively ‘Christian’ from top to bottom – in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public policies – and it aims to keep it that way. But the ‘Christian’ in Christian nationalism is more about identity than religion. It carries with it assumptions about nativism, white supremacy, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and militarism.”⁸ And I would point out that none of those are Christian values.

One Christian nationalist group is the Society for American Civic Renewal. Josh Kovensky wrote an exposé on this group on *Talking Points Memo*.⁹ “It is open to new recruits,” Kovensky writes, “provided you meet a few criteria: you are male, a ‘trinitarian’ Christian, heterosexual, an ‘un-hyphenated American,’ and can answer questions about Trump, the Republican Party, and Christian Nationalism in the right way. One chapter leader wrote to a prospective member that the group aimed to ‘secure a future for Christian families.’”¹⁰

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Christians Against Christian Nationalism, “What Is Christian Nationalism?” a downloadable PDF available (at least as of 23 March 2024) at <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/learn-more>.

⁹ Josh Movensky, “Inside A Secret Society Of Right Wing Christian Men Prepping For A ‘National Divorce,’” *Talking Points Memo*, <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/inside-a-secret-society-of-prominent-right-wing-christian-men-prepping-for-a-national-divorce> (posted 9 March 2024; accessed 23 March 2024).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

One of SACR's objectives is "to have its members form the government of an 'aligned future regime.' ... Other goals include providing 'preferential treatment for members, especially in business,' and to both 'coordinate allied fraternal networks' and 'defend fraternal networks ... against attacks by those opposed to civic renewal, and strongly deter such attacks.'"¹¹ I hear that and think of the Communist Party in China, Putin's kleptocracy, and how the Nazi's functioned in Germany as they gained more and more power.

The whole idea of forming a truly Christian nation is a heresy. Christianity has a long history of getting into bed with political power, and when it does, it loses its relationship with God, drunk on political power. I think it is vital that we call Christian nationalism what it is: a heresy.

Two processions entered Jerusalem. One proclaimed the political and military power of empire. The other proclaimed the kin-dom of God. Christian nationalism wants to merge the Christian faith with the power of empire – and the event from the gospel narrative that we celebrate today says that such a merger is impossible.

The crowd that gathered, waving their branches and spreading their cloaks on the road and shouting, "Hosanna! Save us, son of David!" wanted to be saved from the misery of Pilate and Caesar and Rome. They were begging to be rescued from oppression and injustice, from violence and death.

Hosannas! still resound. Even the stones cry out for justice. "Children and teachers die in pools of blood at school, lies pervade and divide a desperate people, the rich steal everyone's share, courts unwind decades of justice, and even a poisoned earth and sky rage against us."¹² We have to peel off the mask of the faux peace that is enforced by fear and violence, a peace of privilege and guns. We must shout, "*Hosanna, Jesus, hosanna! Save us, NOW!*"

"Two processions entered Jerusalem on that day. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold."¹³

Amen.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Bass, *op. cit.*

¹³ Crossan and Borg, *op. cit.*, 30.