



Roanoke, Virginia

April 2, 2023

“The Throne”

Part VI of the Sermon Series “Lift High the Cross”

John 12:12-13; 19:1-22

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Our scripture reading begins with John 12—two short verses to highlight a Sunday entry into Jerusalem. Jesus enters with the gates with cries of “Hosanna!”, waving palm branches, and a cheering crowd.

And then we fast forward five days to a completely different kind of reception and a completely different crowd. Hear these words starting with John 12 v12.

John 12:12-13. ¹² The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,
‘Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!’

Skipping ahead, much has happened and much has changed in the four and now five days since the impromptu parade for Jesus. On Thursday, Jesus shared a final meal with his friends, they prayed in the garden (or rather, Jesus prayed and the disciples fell asleep), and he was betrayed by Judas, taken to the High Priest. The High priest turns him over to Pilate, the Roman governor in town who was there simply to keep an eye on rowdy Jews in the city for Passover. Just verses before



our passage, Pontius Pilate has already tried to convince the crowd to let Jesus go, but they choose Barabbas instead. And so we come to John 19, v1.

John 19:1-22. ¹Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ²And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. ⁴Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' ⁵So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!' ⁶When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him.' ⁷The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God.'

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰Pilate therefore said to him, 'Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?' ¹¹Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.' ¹²From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, 'If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor.'

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. ¹⁴Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' ¹⁵They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' ¹⁶Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus; ¹⁷and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. ¹⁸There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. ¹⁹Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' ²⁰Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. ²¹Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' ²²Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.'

The story of Jesus' humiliation and crucifixion never stops being painful. It's jarring to picture the quick turn of events from his Sunday entry into the city, to the mob that sweeps him off to Pilate the moment they have their chance. The two scenes clash. One is joyous and hopeful, the other is heartbreaking and humiliating.



According to John, the crowd that met Jesus before the gate into Jerusalem had heard of his miraculous deeds. Specifically, in chapter 12, John says that many of the people were believing because they had either been present to witness Lazarus' miraculous resurrection from the dead, or had heard it secondhand. These men, women, and children were looking for a Messiah, a Savior. And they thought, perhaps, Jesus could be the one.

Days pass, word spreads, and the tides turn. The chanting, cheering crowd were the common folk. Many of them, like Jesus, were visiting the city for Passover, and staying each night outside the gates. Late on that Thursday night and very early that Friday morning, I imagine most of the "Hosanna" crowd was still tucked in bed while wheels were in motion for Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and death. It was the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard who set the grim plan. And once they had moved the scene from ecclesiastical court to the civil at Pontius Pilate's place, there was no turning back. They told Pilate, in no uncertain terms, "We have a law, and according to that law [Jesus] ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Their words spoke of treason. According to Roman imperial belief, the emperor was not simply the ruler of Rome, he was the son of God. And Pilate's role as governor—the whole reason he traveled to Jerusalem in the first place—was to remind the people of that.

The religious leaders told Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, that Jesus claimed to be king. But what sort of king is Jesus? Pilate wanted to know. Pilate needed to know because "king" is a political term, and Pilate is a political person. In our passage from John 19, Pilate keeps moving back and forth between his governor's residence and the crowd outside. The space they are in is called the praetorium—a walled but open-air space—the governor's residence while he is in town. The space had one side laid out for conversation, with a pallet on which Pilate could recline. The other side of the space would have been filled with military equipment hanging on the walls, crates stacked for storage, and a flogging post standing at the ready.

It would have been clear who was in power here. Jesus was at this man's mercy.

The scene cuts back and forth. Pilate moves from questioning Jesus to appeasing the accusers outside. Outside, the people are building in number and in their insistence; this Jesus has got to go. Inside, Jesus appears to remain calm, passive even. Outside, chaos. Inside, baffling calm. As one old spiritual goes, "He never said a mumbling word."

Jesus is unexpected—in every way.

We heard how the story goes. Jesus was executed by the state, with a mocking sign that read above him in three different languages, so no one could miss it, "King of the Jews."

Killed by the kingdom of Rome, ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven.



To the kingdoms of this world, the cross looks pitiful. To the kingdoms of this world, the cross looks like defeat.

To the kingdoms of this world, power is the ultimate means to achieve an end. How often have we witnessed—how often *do* we witness—lying, intimidation, demonizing, bribing, and rationalizing? Their priority is achieving what is good and best for the powerful. It's about winning at all costs, compromising integrity, and maintaining control.

But in the cross, we see lifted up a completely different kind of King. It's a paradox, right? In his dying, we live. In his humiliation, God is glorified. In the cross, there is victory. We do well to remember that in the Gospel of John, Jesus has been in control of his own fate and has headed toward this moment each step along the way. Jesus' willful and noble death is not a weak moment in John, but a powerful and victorious one. Although the soldiers intend to mock Jesus as a defeated king and failed Messiah, Jesus remains almost stoic throughout the gut-wrenching scene, knowing that the systems of power at work in earthly kingdoms are too small for his plans.ⁱ

It may sound benign to our ears, but proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven, proclaiming Jesus as King, was and is a subversive act.

Barbara Lundblad, professor at Union Seminary in New York, shares that one of her former students, an Anglican priest from South Africa, told her about what it was like to believe Jesus was King during the days of apartheid. "Our whole congregation was arrested," he said, "for refusing to obey the government." Lundblad thought she'd misheard him, but he went on to say that all 240 members of the congregation were arrested and put in jail—from babies to a 90-year-old man. "At least babies and mothers were kept together," he added. The pastor himself was imprisoned for a year. To claim that Jesus is King can be dangerous.ⁱⁱ

Perhaps nothing quite so serious has been asked of us ... yet. But the systems and kingdoms in which we exist ought to make us wonder what Jesus would have to say about them. What would Jesus say to a kingdom that glorifies violence but cheapens death? What would Jesus say to a global economy that strips and pollutes a planet, particularly at the expense of the poor, instead of stewarding creation with tenderness and wisdom? What would he say to a notion of personal liberty that insists on an individual's rights, while ignoring civic and spiritual responsibilities, particularly to the vulnerable?

In the Gospel, we get a glimpse of the kind of Kingdom Jesus ushers in. We see Jesus, engaging in deep theological conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well. We see him lean in close to hear the voice of a woman accused in adultery. We see him putting a towel around his waist and then kneeling on the floor to wash his friends' dirty feet.



In the cross, we know a king who never rose so high that he couldn't see those who were down low. In the cross, we know a king that is with and for us when we resist and confront the injustices we see around us. Here and now, we know he ushers in a different kingdom that helps us recognize that it's not enough that my child is safe on the street if yours is not. It's not enough that I have food in my pantry when yours stands empty. It's not enough that my voice is heard while yours is silenced. It's not enough that I feel welcomed and you do not.

We ought to ask ourselves if our lives reflect our citizenship in this alternate kingdom Jesus ushers in. Or do our words and actions suggest our first allegiance lies someplace else? If the answer is unclear, the good news is that it is into this broken world of empires and Pilates and jeering crowds that Jesus comes, and that God loves. It is exactly such hearts he has come to change, he has come to save.

“Hosanna!” we cry. Save us, Lord.

May Holy Week remind us that death has not the final word. In the cross, the weak are made strong. In the cross, the lowly are lifted up. In the cross, we witness a king who loves us all the way to the grave and beyond.

This indeed is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Lindsey S. Jodrey, “Commentary on John 19:1-16a,” Working Preacher, Apr 3, 2022:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-condemned-2/commentary-on-john-191-16a-3>

ⁱⁱ Barbara Lundblad, “John 18:33-37: A Different Kind of King,” Huffington Post, Nov 12, 2012: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/john-18-33-37-a-different-kind-of-king_b_2166819

