

Not to Judge, But to Save
John 12:1-26

Palm Sunday/ 28th John 2021

“The hour has come,” Jesus said, “for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:23). In John’s Gospel, Jesus always knows what time it is. His arrival in Jerusalem, the ancient city of God and the prophets, signaled the approaching hour. We know the story of palm branches and shouts of, “Hosanna!” Hosanna, meaning, “Save us!” The crowds gathered around him as he processed on a donkey into the city. The disciples who were there that day, John tells us, had no idea what was going on. They had no idea what Jesus was doing or why. It was only later, according to John, “when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written, ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt’” (Jn. 12:16, 15).

On this Palm Sunday, I don’t want to dwell on the procession and the palms. That’s only part of the story. Today is “a day of rejoicing and of sorrow,” as the Roman Catholic writer and activist Dorothy Day (1897-1980) wrote in her diary one Palm Sunday in the 1940s. “Again the twofold aspect of the Cross,” she said.¹ For John, the entry into Jerusalem is significant because it leads Jesus one step closer to the defining moment of his life, closer to the day of days when the Son of Man will be “lifted up” and “glorified,” as John liked to say.² Jesus’ entry into the city brings us to the hour, as Jesus knew, the culmination of his life, the hour when he would take on the powers of death and be crucified.

Now, John has his own take on the meaning of Palm Sunday, and it’s directly connected to a story that we find only in John’s Gospel. In the previous chapter, we have the raising of Lazarus from the grave (Jn. 11:1-48). That was the event, when he displayed his power, power over death, power to extend life that turned the religious authorities against Jesus. John says, “So from that day on they planned to put [Jesus] to death” (Jn. 11:53). After that, Jesus walked in secret, in fear of his life. Six days before the Passover, Jesus had dinner at the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume and dried them with her hair (Jn. 12:1-8). When the religious authorities discovered that both Jesus and Lazarus were together, they planned to put Lazarus to death as well (Jn. 12:10). Then we learn, and this is unique for John, that the crowd that was with Jesus when he called Lazarus out of the tomb was with him in Jerusalem, and that they continued to tell everyone about the power Jesus has over death. Word spread. Soon Hellenist (Greek) Jews in town for Passover want to meet the famous Jesus.

In the other Gospels, Jesus heads for the temple to shut down the moneychangers (Mt. 21:12-17; Lk 19:19-26) or he leaves Jerusalem and returns the next day to shut down the temple (Mk. 11:1-19) Only in John’s Gospel do we find Jesus entering the city and heading to the temple for a conversation with these Greek Jews. He says to them, “I solemnly swear to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” (Jn. 12:24-26). Why? Because the “hour” is approaching.

The prospect of what was coming shook Jesus to the core. “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (Jn. 12:27). Everything in John’s telling is leading to this hour. And what is this hour? The hour is the cross. And what is the cross? In John’s Gospel the cross is where Christ is glorified, “lifted up;” the cross is his coronation. In John 17, at the end of his Farewell Discourses, we’re told that Jesus, “looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you’” (17:20).

Glory, glorify, glorified. These are such “churchy” words. They sound so antiquated. Who speaks like this today? What do they even mean? We find these words all through John, they are the special words he uses to describe Jesus’ death on the cross.

What is this glorification? It’s not praise or recognition or adulation, it’s certainly not “Hosanna.” Instead, *glory is the manifestation of God’s power in and through the life and death of Jesus.* When Jesus manifests this power, God is glorified. In his life, in his ministry, Jesus glorified God by being a servant of God’s liberating power, which is what we saw in the raising of Lazarus. That’s why it’s significant that the Lazarus crowd is with Jesus in Jerusalem, because they saw—first hand—the power of God at work through him, they knew, they know his power over death. And now Jesus is about to fulfill the destiny of his life, showing the power of God’s love by taking on, *himself*, the forces of death. Now, he will undergo death. Now, he will enter a tomb. He will give his life over to death, wrestle with death, take it on. He will enter death in order to put death to death—or, perhaps better—enter death in order to redeem death. By *death*, I don’t mean physical, biological death. Scripture understands death as a *force* that struggles, fights, and wages war against God’s determination to be creator, a force that undermines God’s desire to yield life, to grant life, to renew life, to come alive in us.

The word that John uses to describe this deadly force—one that resists and wages war against God’s resolve to grant life is a force within us, within our psyches, our soul, within our relationships, in our family histories, a force that is operative all around us in politics, in the halls of government, in economic systems and the history of nations, in oppressive ideologies that shape us and enslave us and sometimes even kill us—the one word John uses for this deadly force is *kosmos*. As we saw several weeks ago, the Greek word *kosmos* is often translated “world.”³ It’s not incorrect to translate it “world,” but *kosmos* in John’s Gospel should not be confused with creation or the natural world, as in “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” That’s not what John is talking about. It’s probably best that we refrain from translating the word and leave it as *kosmos*, with a “k,” to set it apart.

Why am I stressing this? Because when Jesus says the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, it’s time for the power of God to be manifest in him, on a cross, taking on death, entering death, losing in order to gain something greater, like a seed dying in order to yield a greater fruit. When Jesus manifests the power of God, that is, the power of life in the domain of death, he is wielding the redemptive power of God in the domain of the *kosmos*—he’s taking it on. The “hour” is the cross. It’s the moment, the time when the love of God judges the forces of death and destruction in the *kosmos*. It’s all there in John 12:31, where Jesus says, “Now is the judgment of the world...,” the judgment of the *kosmos*; “now the ruler of the *kosmos* will be driven out.” And the Greek word for “judgment” here is *krisis*. Now is the *krisis* of the *kosmos*. This means that the cross is both the hour of glorification and the hour of *krisis* of the

kosmos. The cross itself is doing the judging and, thus, causing a crisis! And what is being judged? The death-dealing forces of the *kosmos*.

The *kosmos* is a powerful force within the created order, within creation, a force that is at odds with God's hopes and dreams for creation, for you and me. The *kosmos* is working against God's vision of love and grace and justice and healing. The New Testament scholar Walter Wink (1935-2012) called this destructive force "the Domination System;" everything that binds us in sin, that constrains us and alienates us from God.⁴ Those who are being shaped by this anti-God force belong to the *kosmos*, they are "in the *kosmos*." Jesus wants us to be "in the *kosmos*," be in the world, but not belong to the *kosmos* (Jn. 17:14-15).

And, so, what is the crisis? The *kosmos* knows its time is up. This is why Jesus was sent, for this hour, to take on the *kosmos* and to free everyone and everything in its death-grip. The cross is the crisis-hour for the *kosmos*. The cross is always a moment of crisis, because the cross is always judging the *kosmos*, exposing the lies destroying our lives.⁵ Yes, Jesus judges the *kosmos*, but that's not the last word, it's not the goal. This judgment does not lead to annihilation—and this is significant—the *kosmos* is judged. Why? So that it can be saved, in order to redeem it. Because the *kosmos* is worthy of God's love, needs to be loved, so that we can be liberated from its power.

Where do we see the *kosmos* today? Look around! It's everywhere.
Everything that resists God's redemptive love and mercy.
Everything evil, destructive, and demonic.
Everything that breeds hate and fear.
Everything that threatens the safety of our children and steals their future.
Everything that divides and alienates us from ourselves, one another, and from God.
Everything that dehumanizes us.
Everything that oppresses us and enslaves us.
Everything that kills and tries to kill us.
Everything that worships death.
 It's the shootings in Atlanta, and Boulder.
 Racism of every kind.
 Voter suppression in Georgia and elsewhere.
Everything that hinders mercy and grace and forgiveness and healing and justice.
Everything that tries to resist resurrection.
The *kosmos* is everything that questions or denies or pushes against the power of God's love.
It's everything requiring redemption.

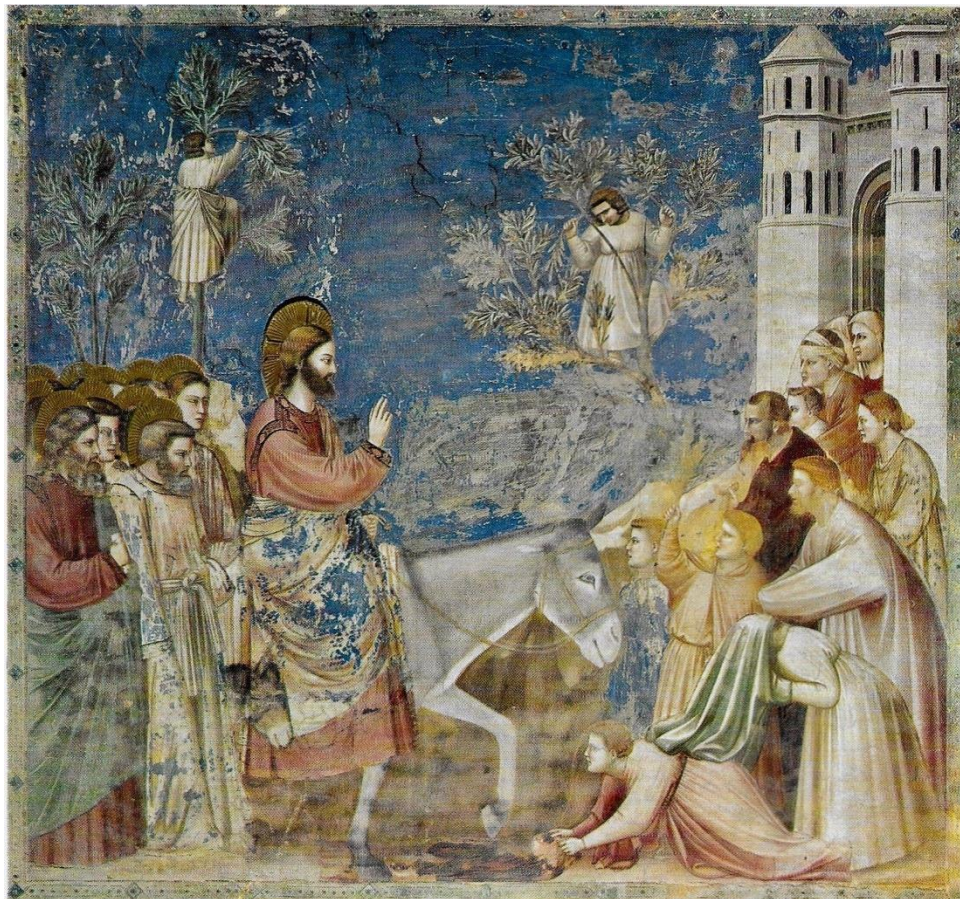
We've been asking throughout Lent, what does love look like? It might be easier to say what it doesn't look like; love doesn't look anything like the *kosmos*.

What does love look like? It's the hour when Christ comes to judge the *kosmos* or disempower it. For the Son was sent into the *kosmos* not to condemn it but to save it (Jn. 3:17), to return it back into relationship with its creator, to save the *kosmos*—to redeem even that which is against God! Why? So that the *kosmos* can become a new creation, a new world where love is embodied in the lives of all God's children and they are free to flourish and live safely in the streets where they live, where justice should reign.⁶ As Cornel West likes to remind us, "Justice is what

love looks like in public.” In John 12:47, Jesus says: “...for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” The same words we heard earlier in John when Nicodemus appeared at his doorstep in the middle of the night looking for life.

The cross was not only an isolated fact of history, it’s also a present-day experience for those who walk in the light of Christ (Jn. 12:36). We share in the cosmic crisis of the cross. For whenever the cross is preached today it’s always crisis-hour for the *kosmos*. The cross judges the *kosmos* in order to free us from its death-grip. And as post-Easter Christians, because we live on the other side of an empty tomb, we know that the *kosmos* doesn’t have the last word, because the *kosmos* has already been saved and is in the process of being saved—the *kosmos* just doesn’t know it yet. *That’s* the good news!

So, Jesus sends us out to wage love in the *kosmos*! May we remember this when we break bread this week in his name. May we know as the women discovered at a tomb that first Easter morning, his “hour” leads to resurrection. For God’s will is that everything, everyone—all of it!—including the *kosmos*, that all *shall* be saved.



“The Entry into Jerusalem” (c.1305) Giotto (c.1266 – 1337).

¹ Dorothy Day, *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day*, Robert Ellsberg, ed. (New York: Image, 2011), 91.

² Lifted up: John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32, 12:34. Glorified: John 7:39, 11:14, 12:16, 12:23, 12:28, 13:31, 13:32, 14:13, 15:8, 17:4, 17:10.

³ For God So Loved, preached February 21, 2021: <https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/for-god-so-loved/>

⁴ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 37ff.

⁵ The theological vision of Karl Barth (1886-1968) was known as a “theology of crisis.” Barth realized during the First World War, which was a crisis for Western “Christian” Europe, that the gospel is always crisis because it judges us. The cross is always judging the *kosmos*. The light of the gospel exposes the darkness of the *kosmos*; the truth of the gospel exposes the lies that destroy our lives. “The Gospel is not a truth among other truths,” Barth said. “Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths.” See *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), 35. What is revealed in the cross is a “crisis that breaks into general time.” See *Church Dogmatics*, I.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), 68.

⁶ This Johannine theme, the redemption of the *kosmos*, can also be heard in Revelation 11:15: “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world [*kosmos*] has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.’” This text is perhaps best known for its inclusion in the “Hallelujah Chorus,” from *The Messiah* by G. F. Handel (1685-1759).