



## **PALM SUNDAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, April 1, 2012**

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**Lection - Isaiah 45:20-25** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 20) Assemble yourselves and come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge—those who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. (v. 21) Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is no one besides me. (v. 22) Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. (v. 23) By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.' (v. 24) Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are

righteousness and strength; all who were incensed against him shall come to him and be ashamed. (v. 25) In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

For every Christian community, Palm Sunday commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, marking the commencement of his faithful weeklong journey to the cross. Progressing toward political execution with redemptive consequences, Jesus' prophetic parade into Jerusalem was a celebratory critique of the status quo of the empire and the corruption of the sacred. In this fleeting moment of crowd solidarity, the people paved the streets with their clothing and sounded, "Hosanna" or "save now." Jesus riding a donkey, symbolic of peace, and having his way paved with palm branches is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. Closing the Lenten season and beginning Holy Week, Palm Sunday furnishes a time for faithful disciples of Jesus to reflect on their recent sacrifices in conversation with the pivotal sacrifice of Jesus. On Palm Sunday, millions of Christians from every corner of the globe enact this biblical moment in salvation history by distributing and waving palm branches in the air. The preacher is often found inciting the people to exclaim, "Ride on King Jesus, no man can a-hinder me."

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 45:20-25**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

As I give thought to the liturgical importance of Palm Sunday, my mind provocatively turns to a jolting remark by Michelle Alexander. In the introduction of [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#), Alexander relates the enthusiasm and exhilaration she experienced the evening Barack Hussein Obama clinched a political victory in his pursuit for the White House, emotions and sentiments virtually ubiquitous for Black America. Walking out of a celebration of this unprecedented feat in American history, Alexander was confronted with an image of the New Jim Crow. "A Black man was on his knees in the gutter...as several police officers stood around him talking, joking and ignoring his human existence."<sup>1</sup> Her celebratory mood was absconded by structural injustice, which most of society perceived as normal. This is meaningfully reminiscent of the Palm Sunday context. Biblically, eerily resembling of our historical moment, the celebration is interrupted and offset by chronic injustices and the social blindness of communities of faith.

As we enjoy waving palms and chanting Hosanna, the observance of Palm Sunday must consistently hold in tension the triumph of the moment and the tenuous spiritual fervor of society that Jesus critiqued. If it persuades us in any way, Palm Sunday in these early years of the Twenty-first century must help us rejoice at Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem. But, our rejoicing must always be commingled with our actions toward those who are purposely and sometimes ignorantly being denied their dignity and human rights on earth and those who are having their potential Kingdom citizenship diminished by our failure to make room for all whom the colt-riding Savior came to set free.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

This pericope unfolds in the context of Mesopotamian militarism, the culmination of Israelite captivity, and Babylonian imperialism. The author of this Deutero-Isaiah passage constructs the

scene of a judicial event, the trial of the Babylonian survivors before a foreign, but ultimate, deity—Yahweh, the God of the Israelites. The fulcrum of this text is the expansive arm of Yahweh’s salvation to a purported enemy of the children of Israel, God’s covenantal community. Eusebius of Caesarea calls this “the catholic gospel to all the nations.”<sup>2</sup>

In this encounter with God, the survivors of the Persian besieging of Babylon hear the voice of Yahweh requesting their audience. In this continuation of the throne scene, Yahweh prods these “survivors of the nations” to move: *assemble, come in and draw near*.

Antithetical to the normal mood and liberty of conquered peoples, the text opens in a tone of hope of survival and granted mobility. We often perceive Palm Sunday only through the lens of the triumphant move of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. With the rampant xenophobia infecting our theology and faith commitments, it is important to note that this text confirms the triumphant presence of the divine alongside an invitation to ALL people to live with God. This is cause to wave palms; this openness is the nature of our Savior. Ride on King Jesus!

Normatively, many lay, pastoral, and academic exegetes of the Bible interpret texts in the Hebrew Bible, particularly regarding the exilic period, through the lens, role, and activities of the Children of Israel, obscuring the relevance of other personalities in the pericope. Historically, we are not the children of Israel. During American slavery, “the Peculiar Institution,” the hermeneutic of *chosenness* and Israelism emerged in the religious expressions of some Black persons in their faith communities prohibited by so-called White Christians of the master and planter classes. Also, the biblical theme of exile registers with historically conscious persons of the African Diaspora, because of the nature and horrific dynamics of the Transatlantic trafficking of Black bodies from Africa to the Americas.

The text next moves to the indictment of the idols’ incapacity to affect salvation; this hints at Yahweh’s exclusive ability to bring salvation to their perilous predicament. Verse 20b, “*They have no knowledge—those who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save,*” shows the dialogical relationship between mediocrity and ignorance. These persons lived ignorant of their own salvation in Yahweh’s plan. Presumably, this text is hinting at an attachment to Marduk, the god of fifty names, Nebo, or Bel; these impotent idols tied the Babylonians to spiritual mediocrity. Contemporarily, people covertly and unconsciously construct idols in our national, political, and social existences. People supplant God with the superficial, tenuous, fleeting realities. Paul Tillich refers to this human proclivity as “the conflict of ultimates.” He proffers,

Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance (the best example is the contemporary idolatry of religious nationalism). The conflict between the finite basis of such a concern and its infinite claim leads to a conflict of ultimates; it radically contradicts the biblical commandments and the first theological criterion.<sup>3</sup>

Tillich is addressing how we shortchange our lives and thwart our potential with counterfeit ultimates. We are called to turn to God instead of wallowing in the impotence of “the insignificant” realities in our lives. Palm Sunday and our Savior leaving a parade to take up a

cross make it imperative that we shy away from the false ultimates in life: the money in capitalism, the nation in nationalism, or the ritualism of religious chauvinism.

The phrase “carry about their wooden idol” contains the Hebrew word *nasah*—meaning to lift. This connotes the burden and weight of these gods. In addition to the impotence of the Babylonian idols, Yahweh intimates how the preoccupation with other gods (counterfeit ultimates), inflicts unnecessary obligations and burdensome distractions from the God who saves—bears or lightens the burdens of those committed to and conscious of God. In spite of this, because of grace, in this passage, the God of Israel demonstrates patience with people wrapped in the maiming tentacles of idolatry.

As we move further into today’s Scripture, in contradistinction to the establishment of the binding Sinai Covenant in Exodus 20, with particular emphasis on the first requisite of the Decalogue, the “hear” of this passage anchors the mandate of radical monotheism—a singular, undivided God-consciousness. According to the canonical event of the Sinai revelation the first commandment restricts, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3, NRSV). The Yahweh of the Sinai covenant nods to the existence of other gods in the Near East with the caveat of His superiority: “no other gods before me.”

In the latter clause of verse 21, Yahweh articulates to the defendants (for those being addressed are indeed on trial), “There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me.” This pronouncement of the singularity and ultimacy of God **also** dictates the commitment of Yahweh to the entirety of creation and not just the Children of Israel!

The three consecutive interrogatives of verse 21: “*Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD?*” point to the self-giving promise of God—to engage all of the families of the earth (Isaiah 12:1-3; 17:1-8). Yahweh, in authority of his absoluteness, swears by himself. One must resist obscuring the self-sufficiency and self-existence of God. God is God all by Himself. “*By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’*” The integrity of God’s character, God’s radical consistency, ensures the unfolding of his proclamations. Paul imported this declaration into Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:10-11. The writer contends that God’s declaration “shall not return” (*shuwb*)—be revoked.

Continuing the dominant theme of Yahweh’s ultimacy, verse 23 signals the submission of all persons to Yahweh’s cosmic lordship. This requires personal accountability on the part of all people. The God of the Oppressed invites even the oppressors into an egalitarian and peaceful community where God is the only Superior. The one committed to the Lord benefits from God’s character and nature. “*Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength.*” In the opening lines of the revelatory poem “The Prodigal Son,” the literary genius James Weldon Johnson captures the essence of verse 24 with “Young man, young man, your arms are too short to box with God.”<sup>4</sup>

The “survivors of the nations,” the Babylonians find themselves in a situation they inflicted on others for decades—they are on the underside of military conquest and imperial impulse. Fully

aware of their acts against the people of Israel (God's atrophied people), Yahweh creates space for the Babylonians to present or plead their case to him.

God engages the Babylonians with more dignity and mercy than we have shown each other in our red and blue states and our culture wars over one non-ultimate issue or another. This evokes a sense of joy. Though we disrupt, discard, and destroy the things close to God, he refuses to compensate us with mutual contemptuous disregard. Through a signal act of mercy, Yahweh expands the parameters of his covenant with an unprecedented invitation into his salvific sphere.

The Babylonians are invited to partake in salvation, instead of the punishment typically imposed on conquered peoples in the context of military exploitation; God extends cosmic hospitality. The merciful disposition of God toward these gentile strangers **informs the practices of the faithful**. Palm Sunday celebrates a similar glimpse of God's disposition and commitment to the salvation of the world. Though the Babylonians arguably merited a condemnatory response from God (and so do we), God inhabits this moment in their history and all the days of our lives with the gift of mercy.

If God deals fortunately with adversarial communities and personalities, how much more does it signify God's allegiance to *the faithful*? Verse 25 allays all worries of the people of God, the offspring of Israel. God establishes them and evokes praise (halal) from the descendants of Israel. We are those descendants, grafted in by the blood of the one who rode in on a colt as the people shouted "hosanna, hosanna."

### **Celebration**

This text teaches us to celebrate the expansive love and guarantees of our faithful God. The God trusted by and available for our foreparents demonstrates faithfulness in the midst of our economically down-turned and sometimes debilitating lives. Hallelujah for God's uncompromised faithfulness to his word. God's promises are still true, forever and ever. We can trust God to fulfill his promise of salvation—social and spiritual.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sounds:** The voice of Yahweh; wooden idols being lifted; and

**Sights:** Scurrying and assembling of people; frightened faces; Babylonians on trial; and God as Judge.

### **III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions**

#### Palm Sunday Prayer

God of unfailing Love,

We come before you on this day with gratitude and joyous hearts because your love knows no bounds. No boundaries, limits, or obstacles—including those of our own making—can thwart your loving kindness from following us all the days of our lives. Yet during this week, your story of passion mirrors to us how we have chased your love and

needed your compassion. We welcome you, not with short-lived praise and soon-aborted allegiance, but to abide in us unconditionally. We approach you in awe of the Mystery of your faithfulness. We kneel before you with confession, acknowledging our complicity with friends and enemies alike who through the ages have disowned you through words and actions. We kneel before you in gratitude, forever thankful that even during this contentious week your love richly enraptures our being. As we enter into this commemoration of Holy Week, fortify us with the confidence of your peace-inspiring and peaceful presence. In your name. Amen.

### Quotation

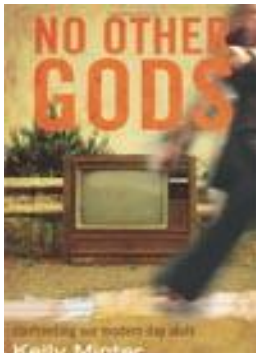
“It may well be that the world is denied miracle after miracle and triumph after triumph because we will not bring to Christ what we have and what we are. If, just as we are, we would lay ourselves on the altar of service of Jesus Christ, there is no saying what Christ could do with us and through us.”

—William Barclay

### Helpful Books for Holy Week



Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. For God Alone: A Primer on Prayer. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009.



Minter, Kelly. No Other Gods: Confronting our Modern Day Idols. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008.

## Notes

1. Michelle Alexander. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. New York, NY: The New Press, 2010. p. 2.
2. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT, XI. Mark W. Elliot, ed; General Editor, Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. p. 84.
3. Paul Tillich. Systematic Theology, Volume 1. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951. p. 13.
4. James Weldon Johnson. God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. 1927; New York, NY: Penguin Classics Press, 1968.