



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*

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## **“The Power of Powerlessness” Isaiah 50:4-9a; Luke 19:28-40**

In a few moments, we will baptize some children into the church family, and they will be immediately permitted to receive Communion that follows. We will ask them (and/or their families), do they want to be baptized. But we will not tell the children the whole truth. We don't do this to lie to children; we do this because they cannot understand all the Bible tells us about baptism. Because being baptized into Christ means being baptized into his death, as Paul said in Romans 6:3 “Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

That's not something we can communicate well to children. And yet as adults, we don't do so well with it, either, do we? As we hear the words of what is called Jesus' “Triumphal Entry” from Luke's account in his chapter 19, let's listen for what God is saying to US about “power”—our power, and God's power. *[text]*

This is a familiar text. If we were raised in the church, this might have been one of those days, as kids, we might actually enjoy going to church. In our church in Detroit, I remember them passing out what they called “palm leaves”—but which look suspiciously like leaves from what we call “day lilies” here—and having “sword fights” with my friends while we were waiting in line to go into worship, or to parade around the classroom.

But we grow up, and leave childhood behind. And as we do that, we often leave behind the Bible stories, back in the world of childhood. But what if this was an adult story—a very adult story? What if there were adult things going on, a drama that the kids would not understand? That's what I propose is indeed happening here, as Jesus makes his entry into the Holy City.

If you read the gospel accounts through, one of many patterns you'll see is the conflict and confusion over who Jesus is. The disciples—those closest to him—are particularly clueless. Sometimes they get it, but not in a deep way—like children.

There are groups of people around Jesus who all have their ideas about him. The religious authorities see him as a rabbi, and are suspicious that he is teaching God's People can be lax about the Law of Moses. These devout experts listen carefully to Jesus' interpretations and applications of the Law, and occasionally set up verbal traps to make him look foolish, for “he teaches with authority,” the people say, “not like the Scribes”.

There are Zealots in the crowd—and among his disciples. Zealots were like the Palestine Liberation Front—a party committed to the overthrow of the occupation forces of Rome, even with violence. The more religious among them had read portions of the Scriptures where God had promised a liberator-leader. They heard about Jesus, and were watching and listening for him to “come out”, declare the Romans the “evil empire”, and raise the army of the people to

free the Promised Land, as God's judges had done, centuries before. God would judge the people, beginning with the pagan Romans. It would be the end of the age, "The Day of the Lord" mentioned by the prophets. When Jesus started a sentence with, "The Kingdom of God"... their ears perked up. Was he going to declare himself the king, or the servant of that king, and since they were the People of God, was he going to call them now to fight against Rome?

A couple of times during his ministry, after some particularly striking miracle, the crowds started to move to crown Jesus their king. But Jesus got out of there quickly; he told his followers and those he healed to tell no one about him. And this was why—they would also "get it wrong", and he'd have more and more headaches addressing the people's agenda, when he had God's work to do.

There were poor people in the crowd. Of course, most of the people were very poor—under obligation for crushing taxes, living on subsistence agriculture, and subject to the uncertain economics that everyone on the low side of rural society knows. Family farmers today are just the current example of this reality. These poor people knew their needs. To them, Jesus offered understanding, healing, and a new way of life based on justice and love.

All these groups in the crowd; all these agendas. The crowd spots Jesus and his disciples coming into the City. People take off their cloaks and lay them down before the donkey, which to me is a sign they were pledging their loyalty to this king who would liberate them from Rome. Some parade walkers cut palm branches, the other gospels tell us—palm branches the traditional symbol of God's people. They chant at the top of their lungs, "What do we want?" "Messiah!" "When do we want him?" "Now!" No, actually they chanted part of Psalm 118, suggesting this was a God-driven, royal arrival.

That's what upset the religious authorities. Literally, the crowds were saying, "Jesus is THE GUY"—let me tell you about his many miracles! And of course, they didn't have miracles or even helpful teachings to compete with this. No wonder they were upset. But they were also upset for political reasons. The crowds were saying, "Jesus is THE GUY", and we all should swear loyalty to him as he leads us to drive Rome outahere! "Shut up," they cried. "Master, tell your followers to shut up! When they hear about this, the Romans will come out here and chop us to bits!" "Can't be helped," Jesus says, with a smile and a sigh. If they shut up, the very stones will shout "Hosanna!"

One more opinion about Jesus is shown in this story—the opinion of Jesus, himself. His opinion is acted out—a parable in action. If he were trying to enter the City as a warrior, he would have found a stallion, proud and strong, BIG and impressive. But Jesus sought out a donkey, a humble servant animal that ordinary people would have. Bumping along on the little donkey, he was drawing a cartoon of the strongman leader of the people. Jesus was saying to all who had eyes to see, "I'm not who you think I am." It's as though he was saying to the crowd, "April fool!"

The mismatch between Jesus' sense of himself and the hopes of the crowd is ironic. It's kinda like the mismatch in this picture: an escalator installed at the entrance to this fitness club!

Once again, from the very beginning in the Incarnation (as John's gospel prelude makes clear, and Paul echoes in Philippians 2), Jesus is stepping down, not up. He put aside his

godness, and stepped into human life, with all our limitations. He lived our human life to its fullest potential, living in unbroken intimacy with God until the end. He ducked every human dignity; the king of Glory came as a poor man in a backward corner of the world. He put perspective on human power—blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, the hungry and those hungry for justice. He kept away from kingship. He ascended an ass to make his point, bumping along the street in a comical way. Jesus gave up his power, put himself in the hands of betrayers, oppressors, corrupt officials, and murderers. He did not defend himself in his trials. He let humans do their worst. He gave up every shred of dignity. He gave up his life.

That's why the church has read part of the Servant Song of Isaiah 50:4-9a on this Sunday:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue,  
to know the word that sustains the weary.  
He wakens me morning by morning,  
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.

The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears,  
and I have not been rebellious;  
I have not drawn back.

I offered my back to those who beat me,  
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from mocking and spitting.

Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,  
I will not be disgraced.  
Therefore have I set my face like flint,  
and I know I will not be put to shame.

He who vindicates me is near.  
Who then will bring charges against me?  
Let us face each other!  
Who is my accuser?  
Let him confront me!

It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.  
Who is he that will condemn me? (NIV)

Jesus became powerless. And no one has ever had as much power.

The problem is, we don't want to follow that. Jesus said we were to take up our crosses and follow him—OUR crosses. Our CROSSES! And "daily", he said.

No wonder we are willing to "believe in him", recognize him as a great, dead moral teacher, but not follow him. A number of us wear little crosses on our necks or bracelets, or carry small wooden crosses in our pockets. Is that what Jesus meant about "taking up our cross daily and following him"? No, Jesus meant so much more than that; he meant putting God's agenda first, and not our own. He meant "dying to self", as Paul knew so well.

Now, this is far too complicated for children. But as we have grown older, we have learned that life is rarely simple. There are people with mixed motives all around us—heck, WE have mixed motives and contradictory thoughts and feelings, ourselves—about a LOT of things! And if we have become wise, as well as just experienced, we will recognize our own willfulness, and the ways we avoid, deny, duck out of, doing what Jesus told us to do.

So we invite children into the church family. But we invite them in so that we can continue to raise them to know more and more of Jesus, as they are able. As they gain greater capacity to understand conflict and contradictions, we show them a bigger Jesus, and a still-bigger Jesus. And WE are on the same growth path as our children, aren't we?

If our kids are lucky, by God's grace, they will see us give up our power out of love. And if they see that, our children just might see Jesus in us.

(kids back in—intro to Baptism, then Communion)

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on April 1, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]