

## The End of Ways and Means

*A Palm Sunday sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 21:1-17  
on April 2, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

### I.

We've spent this school year "on the way" with Jesus, examining the ancient roads he walked, the paths toward God he proclaimed, the journey of life and faith he invited people into, the lessons he shared along the way. Yet when we talk about "the way" in America in 2023, we know that our collective imaginations don't just rest in this path of life that Jesus models. We think of tenacity and grit. ("Where there's a will, there's a way!," we say.) We consider the purity of perspective. ("You can't have it both ways!," we insist.) We sometimes shrug in realistic defeat. ("That's just the way it is," we sigh.) Yet we rarely think about the way apart from the means, don't we?

The way is the path, the steps we take to move from one place to another. The means are how we get there. The way can become the 'why' – the way of health, relationships, happiness, flourishing. The means are the 'how' – how we move from point A to point B, how we map it, and fund it, and energize it, and make that way possible. When we put them together, "ways and means" begin to describe all the mechanisms and methods and resources by which we achieve success. In our government, the Committee on Ways and Means are our tax-writers. In our daily lives, the "ways and means" describe how we live.<sup>1</sup>

### II.

Ways and means were surely on the minds of Jesus' disciples as they readied for his arrival in Jerusalem. For Jerusalem was the Holy City, the

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<sup>1</sup> With gratitude to Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, for his imagery around "ways and means" that informed the writing of my sermon.

place of power and the home to the great King, as Jesus referenced to his listeners on the mount. Although this would be Jesus' first trip, the presence of Jerusalem had loomed large throughout his life. Matthew tells us Jerusalem had shaken with the birth of Jesus and would be thrown into turmoil with his arrival now. Thousands of people have arrived into Jerusalem for Passover, there to make their sacrifice to God. The city was charged with energy. It's here that opposition to Jesus was building, and here where he will lament: "oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus will soon say, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How I've wished to gather your children like a mother hen gathers her brood, but you were not willing."<sup>2</sup> The disciples wouldn't have known it, but Jerusalem would be the end of the way.

As we revisit this familiar story, I wonder if a clue to understanding this ancient story of palms and processions is to shift our gaze away from Jesus for a moment and land upon the people in his presence.

The first we meet are the two disciples on "donkey detail," as my pastor friend Dr. Darryl Aaron likes to say. Matthew tells us that just outside of Jerusalem, Jesus asked them to go into the village ahead and fetch a donkey and a colt. If asked about it, Jesus says to the disciples, tell them, "The Lord needs them." As we've learned over these months in Matthew's gospel, Matthew wrote with a keen eye looking back into Jewish history, tying tightly the knot between the long-awaited Messiah and Jesus as the one who fulfills the promises.

Then we hear from the crowds. That the humble Messiah atop a donkey would ride into a tumultuous, electrifying city looking unlike any king they'd

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 23:37-38.

ever known was sure to cause a stir. But these people – the “very large crowd,” Matthew tells us – were raucous. Spreading their cloaks on the road, waving the branches they’d grabbed from the trees, running alongside Jesus with a cry: “hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!”

Two thousand years later, and our hosannas look joyful, don’t they? “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” with the organ resounding through the room, our processional giving a taste of the coming Alleluias for Easter. But let us remember the original meaning that in just a word, “hosanna” juxtaposed praise and deep need. “*Hosanna* – meaning, save us! *Hosanna* – meaning, help us now!” All together in the simmering energy of Passover with Pontius Pilate and his empire breathing down the necks of his people, the crowds shouted *hosanna* to their humble hero, *save us* to their meek Messiah, *liberate us* to their weak-yet-strong king. About this clash, Frederick Buechner writes this: “Despair and hope. They travel the road to Jerusalem together, as together they travel every road we take – despair at what in our madness we are bringing down on our own heads, and hope in him who travels the road *with us* and *for us* and who is the *only one of us* all who is not mad.”<sup>3</sup>

### III.

Despair and hope on the way. Pain and praise as our means. “Hosanna!” we cry. “Save us, Jesus! Rescue us, liberate us, set us free!” Oh how we long to surrender to the way of life, but oh how we refuse to relinquish our means. After every mass shooting, we fill the airwaves and the feeds our thoughts and prayers, yet our firearm fever will not break, for we refuse to beat our guns into plowshares and learn war anymore, “deeply hypocritical,” as

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<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas, “Save Us We Pray,” <https://www.journeywithiesus.net/essays/2958-save-us-we-pray>

theologian Miroslav Volf says, “about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve.”<sup>4</sup> With every increasingly-dire report on our warming, suffering planet, we put a few more sheets of paper in the recycling bin and think “something should be done!,” yet we change the channel and move on to the next, for we refuse to give up the very things that make for our comfort. When we come up against challenges to our long-held beliefs or new understandings that are painful or difficult to confront, we ban the books and legislate our hate, often in the very name of the God who created in radiant diversity, each and every one of us bearing the divine image in our beloved lives. “Save us from our means!,” we cry, “but don’t make us give them up!”

The end of ways and means doesn’t just descend on us in crowds, that we know all too well. In our own hearts, we cry out: *save us* from the stubborn anger that will not let us go or the terror that stuns us awake before dawn. *Liberate us* from the secrets we think we must keep and the anguish we feel doomed to carry. *Rescue us* from the relentless pace, the unyielding exhaustion, the daily grind, the numbing addictions. *Hosanna, Jesus!*

And yet, we know what the crowds would soon figure out. Jesus rarely saves us in the way we expect. Instead of bringing violence to Pilate, he gathers with his friends for a meal. Instead of going to every limit to assure of his innocence, he prays in the garden. Instead of freeing himself and those on his left and right, he relinquishes: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” On this holy brink of what has been and what lies ahead, we wonder: what does the Lord need from us now? And how will we surrender to that liberation?<sup>5</sup>

#### IV.

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<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Volf.

<sup>5</sup> With gratitude to dear friend, Rev. Alan Sherouse, for this imagery.

A few weeks ago, one of my children was really struggling. A particular item in their life had become a problem – once beloved, now betraying a complicated relationship of fixation and overreliance. It dulled their vibrancy and clouded their kindness, and it became clear to Josh and me that we needed to make a change. On the night when we announced that we'd be putting this item away for awhile, our child could only weep. No anger, no protest, no denial, no bargaining – only tears. They needed no convincing of the problem, only to be held in surrender and relief.

Friends, after months of movement, of traveling with Jesus on the way, we have arrived with him here. Here is Holy Week. Here are our palms and our tears, our praise and our lament. Here is God on a donkey, and the powers of this world crucifying Love made flesh. Here is the table set and the table overturned. Here is the betrayer and the basin, the presence and the absence, the cross and the tomb. And here at the brink of the end, we are greeted by a redeemer who receives it all.

As we wander down the road that Holy Week sets before us, may we pay attention to the ways and means we bring. Notice the paths that lead to dead ends, the detours that lead you away from the way of Life, shortcuts that you squeeze through along the way. Look at the means you use, the artifacts and commitments and resources that you think will bring you security.

In the holy days ahead, my prayer for you is that you hear the invitation: 'the Lord needs your hosannas.' The Lord needs your hosannas, friends, because we need them too. The Lord needs your praise and your pain, all the old cloaks and scratchy branches you can give him. The Lord needs your cold and broken hosannas, for in them, you reach the end of your ways and means

and the beginning of his. You relinquish what you've been carrying. You trust in the fullness of surrender. You draw courage from Jesus. You meet him with bread and cup, you let him wash your feet, you grieve with him in the garden, and beg mercy for him at the cross. You wait expectantly for what will be.

And as the road winds ahead to the cross, may you know that it is paved with blessing. This road to the cross is prepared for the demonstrators and the donkey-fetchers, the deniers and the betrayers, the delighted spectators and the angry mobs, the grieved and the grieving, those in power and those whom power abuses. This road to the cross welcomes children and youth, middle-agers and seniors, you and you and you and me to move from the sidelines into the street, linking arms together so that no matter the road, no matter the trial, no matter the march or the cause, we walk it together, shouting hosanna every step of the way.

For it's all here at the end: the end of ways and means, an end that gives way to the beginning of life everlasting.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> With gratitude to Debie Thomas for this way of concluding her Palm Sunday meditation. I found such resonance after talking for so many months of movement ("on the way") to end with "here."  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2958-save-us-we-pray>