

**the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström**  
**Palm Sunday A**  
*Matthew 21:1-11*

**Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC**  
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When you enter the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, the first stop is the beautiful *Church of All Nations*, which claims to hold the place where Jesus prayed on that last evening in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a likely enough looking spot, particularly because artists have portrayed Jesus praying outdoors on this large piece of jagged rock that now extends upward through the floor of the church.

Before you enter, there is a prominent sign that stops every preacher I have known in his or her tracks. It simply says, “Please: No Explanations Inside the Church.” Who knew that it would be so easy as simply posting a sign?

Our group from IUCC, after touring the church, walked down into one of the many meeting places among the ancient olive trees, some of which may have provided shade to Jesus and his disciples. We were in the garden. Our group used this as an opportunity to talk about what happened here, and we sat down on broken plastic chairs and benches in a circle. I remember feeling a little overcome when I was asked to talk about the place in which we now found ourselves. The first thing I could say was, “This is the real thing.” People in our group related to me later that this was the place that felt the most spiritual to them of any of the sites we visited. It was here in the Garden of Gethsemane where we passed around a Bible and read the passages that took place here, concluded with a prayer and then Howard began us in the spontaneous singing of the “Alleluia” that will return to be sung again next week.

Looking beyond the quiet and shade of this garden, the bones of Jerusalem lie buried ahead of us, and the walls of Jerusalem rise up much as they did two thousand years ago; the temple mount long destroyed, but the serpentine stone ramparts still winding around the city, punctuated by ancient gates and tenacious green branches that insist on growing through the stone crevices in the walls—a metaphor for the insistent staying power of the people there.

This is the place that Jesus would pass by earlier in that last week on his entry into Jerusalem, and the place he would return to in prayer that night in the garden. In the distance you can see the gate through which he passed on a donkey, and all around are the reminders of mortality—the graves, packed close and tight together, of more than 150,000 Jews from across the centuries, including the traditional tomb of the prophets Haggai, Malachi and Zechariah. It is still used today—Menachim Begin asked to be buried there, and modern dates cut in fresh stone find small niches among the more ancient; most of them mark visits there in the small stones that rest on top of the tombstones in remembrance.

The stones and tombs go on across the valley—one passes through the physical evidence of those who lived in the ancient city in perhaps the cemetery in most continuous use in the world.

That year, in 30 A.D., Pontius Pilate rode in pomp and ceremony into the city from its other side. He did so during Passover, when Jews reminded each other of a time when they had been liberated, and therefore, Pilate’s presence at this holy time, in such a show of power in his re-entry into Jerusalem, was in turn a reminder to the Jews that they were anything but liberated. At Passover, the city swelled with pilgrims and each year, this royal Roman procession wound its way into the city to stifle any thoughts of rebellion.

At the same time Pilate rode in from the west, another procession was beginning in the east. Jesus sent his disciples on ahead to look for a donkey, and thereby makes an obvious and

dangerous connection to a scripture from *Zechariah 9:9* “Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey’s colt.”

The symbol of Roman power and theology rides in majesty from the west. From the east, past the very bones of Jerusalem’s past, Jesus takes on the mantle of representing a kingdom of God that is greater than any political power. He knows what he is implying by wearing these words of Zechariah, and he actually rides in from the opposite direction on a colt. Not only does he mirror the actions of royalty going on across the city, he rides into town to the waving of palm branches, which is a symbol of Israel’s independence movement. This is obviously Messianic and a direct challenge to Rome.

It is street theatre, and a satiric attack on the pomp of Rome’s military. It is an act of civil disobedience such as would be seen in modern times through Gandhi’s salt march to the sea, or Dr. King’s march from Selma to Montgomery. In fact, it is Jesus’ way of non-violent civil disobedience that would inspire King and Gandhi.

Jesus is mocking Roman authority and demonstrating just how a real leader and liberator acts—with humility, simplicity and non-violence.

The year 2011 began with worldwide protests and civil disobedience. The citizens of twenty-four countries rose up for; freedom, independence from dictators, fair wages, fair elections, protection of well-earned benefits, against corruption and in solidarity with the people of other nations. These twenty-four countries that opened what might called the next momentous year of civil disobedience and protests are; Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Cuba, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Honduras, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Tunisia, Turkey, the UK, the US, Venezuela and Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

They join the people of Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, and are recently united by the protests in Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria. In the past few months, we have watched brave men and women protesting against leaders, dictators and military power that evoke the ancient struggle against the authority of Rome. Some of them died violently or simply disappeared—but they went into the city squares knowing what might happen to them, and knowing as well how the status-quo would be maintained if they did not.

In particular, we might pay tribute to the heroic Egyptian people who found the heart and courage to make a dramatic transformation in their history through unity and solidarity. Together, the people stood against injustice and tyranny for the sake of freedom, a decent living, and the rights that they were robbed of without mercy over the past three decades. As we watched the news unfold, there were countless heroic men and women who put their lives on the line and some of those lives were lost.

2011 has been a year full of images of violence. Throughout the Middle East and elsewhere where people gather in protest, stones have been thrown with deadly force, scenes of water cannons blazing against the people and the noxious Molotov cocktail hurled in return; batons, fire-rockets, tanks and guns in full employ—a people against the regime that would control their destiny.

The year 30 A.D. also began with a protest during Passover that began in civil disobedience, marched through the week in the scourging, humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus.

Father John Dear is the author of, *A Persistent Peace: One Man's Struggle for a Nonviolent World*. He looks upon Jesus as “a walking force of non-violence.” Dear says, “He was the living Spirit of the reign of non-violence, walking in the kingdom of violence... His actions were the committed response of someone on fire with love and truth... And, he was

willing to stand up to the principalities and powers and face every level of violence, including arrest, jail, trial, torture and death by crucifixion. As a force of non-violence, he would confront all these evils and overcome them through suffering love.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus never knew one of his greatest disciples, Mahatma Gandhi, who once said, “Jesus was the most active resister known perhaps to history. This was non-violence par excellence.”<sup>3</sup>

In Dr. King’s Palm Sunday sermon in 1959, he spoke about what it felt like to stand in that same Garden of Gethsemane and look out over the ancient gates in the old city where Jesus made a triumphal entry, just as some of us here in this room did last May. But then, he asked his congregation to indulge him while he talked about Gandhi instead on Palm Sunday.

I suspect that he did this because the Palm Sunday message is about the orchestration of a non-violent protest. Surely, the donkey that was waiting for Jesus had been pre-arranged—there was nothing mystical about it. In fact, the piece of political street theatre that allowed for Jesus to enter from the east in such a lowly fashion while Pilate came in from the west could only have been carefully planned that so many would be there to greet him with palm branches, a symbol of Israel’s liberation.

Instead, King decided to tell his congregation about Gandhi’s great salt march. Enduring a high tax on salt, and unable by British law to take salt from the sea, Gandhi set out on a two hundred mile walk to the sea with eighty people, which during his walk, became over a million. Once there, Gandhi walked into the water and lifted up some of the salt in the water in his hand, to signify the wrongs that had been done to the people in the unjust tax they had been forced to pay, and to demonstrate that they were willing to break the laws in pursuit of what was right.

Gandhi said to his people, “If you are hit, don’t hit back; even if they shoot at you, don’t shoot back; if they curse you, don’t curse back; but just keep moving. Some of us might have to die before we get there, some of us might be thrown in jail before we get there; but let us just keep moving.”

And Dr. King observed, “And they kept moving, and they walked and walked, and millions of them had gotten together when they finally reached that point. And the British Empire knew, then, that this little man had mobilized the people of India to the point that they could never defeat them. And they realized, at that very point, that this was the beginning of the end of the British Empire as far as India was concerned.

“He was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his lifetime, than any other person in the history of this world. And just with a little love in his heart and understanding goodwill and a refusal to cooperate with an evil law, he was able to break the backbone of the British Empire. He refused to follow the way of violence, and only decided to follow the way of love and understanding goodwill and refused to cooperate with any system of evil.”<sup>4</sup>

And of course, it was the Palm Sunday message of the Jesus of non-violent civil disobedience that inspired Gandhi, which in turn, led Dr. King on the same path. All of these would lead to death, while, as Gandhi put it, “being the change that you wish to see in the world.”

In resisting and being resisted, it is too easy for us to turn to the ways of the empire—from brutal force, violence, intimidation and fear, to systems that enrich the few at the expense of the poor. The ways of the empire exist all around us today, as our culture continues to apply its energies to war and the weapons of war; the things that inflict harm instead of relieving it. To move against this tide is to walk into Jerusalem knowing the consequences, and few of us dare to do that.

The year 30 A.D. also began with a protest during Passover that began in civil disobedience, marched through the week in the scourging, humiliation and crucifixion of Jesus and continued in a long arc towards justice, where, as preacher Gary Roth once said, “In a generation, people will be marveling at the followers of Christ. ‘See how they love each other!’ One ancient commentator will be saying of them, ‘They have turned the world upside down!’”<sup>5</sup>

The year 2011 began with protest and civil disobedience, and much more is still to come as tyrants and despots are called down and oppression, in whatever form it takes, is resisted. Let us hope that the ways of non-violence taught in the gospel accounts of today’s story, as well as in the lives of Dr. King and Mohandas Gandhi serve as examples of the best ways to change the world. As followers of Jesus, we take up where he left off, which means, with the illegal work of non-violent civil disobedience to unjust laws and warfare.

It will be this movement of powerlessness, of the way of the servant-leader, of the way of love, which will ultimately conquer the world. AMEN.

### ***Sermon Resources***

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2F9kn9KfFA&feature=related>
2. Fr. John Dear, essay: “Jesus and Civil Disobedience.”
3. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1964) p. 40
4. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi*, Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Ala., March 22, 1959
5. Gary Roth, in his sermon, “In God’s Name”

### **Scripture for Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011**

#### ***Matthew 21:1-11***

1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately. “ 4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 5 “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” 10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” 11 The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

