

# KING FOR A DAY

A Palm Sunday Sermon on Matthew 21:1-17—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart  
April 9, 2107—The First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

1.  
How come a child can get so excited about eating a burger and fries just because she's wearing a paper crown on her head? My four-year-old loves it when we head to a certain fast food place where the meal isn't complete without the crown. "Yes, Jana," I assure her, "You are my burger queen for a day."

Even though the United States revolted against the British Crown over 240 years ago, we are still fascinated by crowns and royalty. Disney takes that fascination to the bank over and over, with young girls dressing up like Cinderella, Elena or Elsa with outfits and tiaras. Growing up, my brother and I first relished taking turns climbing our jungle gym and shouting down to the other, "I'm the king of the castle, and you're the dirty rascal!" Then we learned how to play checkers and relished getting to say, "King me," making our brother give a mock coronation, placing another checker piece on top like a crown. Then we learned how to play chess and relished winning by checkmate, forcing our brother to tip his king over on its side. And then there are those fast food crowns.

But if we want to remember what royalty and crowns have actually meant in history, we could look no further than Milford. The church's founders fled religious persecution from the Church of England, which was run by the British

crown. A couple decades later Milford hid two of the judges who signed King Charles I's execution warrant, which is why in retribution the British folded New Haven colony into the Connecticut colony. And then the Revolutionary War—the patriot Prisoners of War with smallpox dumped on our shore to die. Art Stowe's great-great-great grandfather died taking care of those sick soldiers who were fighting against the crown, King George III!

Lin-Manuel Miranda imagines in his musical *Hamilton* what that perhaps mad king would have expressed to the colonies leading up to the war had he an opportunity to sing a 1960s love song across the pond:

*"You'll be back, soon you'll see,  
You'll remember you belong to me...  
And when push comes to shove, I will send a  
fully armed battalion to remind you of my  
love."<sup>i</sup>*

The song pokes fun at how this musical genre sounds a little cheesy in comparison to hip hop, and captures the contradiction of wielding authoritative human political power in "love", especially when that power is threatened by rebellion. "When push comes to shove, I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love"? Later King George sings a variation, "'Cuz when push comes to shove, I will kill your friends and family, to remind you of my love."

Kings, Miranda points out, can confuse concern for others with concern for power, and use their power to preserve itself no matter the cost to others.

Absolute power has corrupted many a leader over the centuries, or at least compromised their motives.

While we have far fewer official kings, queens and emperors in this world today than we did just a couple centuries ago, political descendants of royalty still linger. Whether it's Ivan the Terrible or Vladimir Putin, King George III or Syria's Assad, Pharaoh or Obama or Trump, the world's rulers act in ways that may or may not benefit others but that almost always benefit themselves or at least their political futures.

2.

Even though Jesus' original triumphal entry into Jerusalem took place almost 2,000 years ago, we Christians still commemorate Palm Sunday both as a celebration of Jesus in our lives and as the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Jesus wears no crown when he arrives in Jerusalem, but make no mistake about it, he is supposed to be viewed as if he does have a crown on his head.

As Matthew points out, prophecies – that come from Isaiah 62 and Zechariah 9 of our Old Testament – tell of a king entering Zion, which is a nickname for Jerusalem, on a donkey and/or a colt. The people are psyched about this, they understand enough of the prophetic background to

see what's going on and to participate in it. They want to king him right then and there.

What that in mind, some see Palm Sunday as an offensive push by Jesus to overthrow the political structure in place at the time, which includes the Roman governor Pilate; Rome's puppet king Herod, who technically rules the Jewish region of Judea but who has to answer to Rome; and then the Jewish established system of scribes and Pharisees, who maintain the stringent religious observance of the people.

Take note that the path of Jesus on that original Palm Sunday resembles the trail left behind by a storm. Along the road into Jerusalem, cloaks are strewn along the road as well as tree branches, ripped out of their tree trunks. The whole city shakes, Matthew tells us. Inside the temple, money changers duck for cover as tables are flipped over and coins fly every-which-where.

All along the storm's path, crowds have been shouting "save us," but not to be saved from the storm but to be saved by the storm. Because the storm is Jesus. And the storm is those who praise him and follow him that day.

This storm is making the leaders scared, and then making them mad. 'Remember we had an arrangement – we lord our power over you and maintain an oppressive peace – Pax Romana – and you get some notion of security. Now what's this? Who's this Jesus think he is? The

king of the castle? Is he trying to knock us over? Does he think we'll resign that easily, just hand over our power, give him the crown and get off the jungle gym?

The last straw – or, it's Palm Sunday, so maybe it would be the last frond – is that even the children, in response to Jesus' work in the temple, cry out, "Hosanna, save us, Jesus!" When even the children stop fearing those who are supposed to be in power, then you know your power is in real danger.

I think that by the end of Palm Sunday, after Jesus has played king for a day, he has pretty much sealed his fate with the established powers – scribes, Pharisees, king and Roman empire. 'You think you have power to turn things upside down, Jesus? We'll show you power.'

It's what we've seen countless time before & right now in Syria. Desperate rulers are often willing to leverage the powers of fear and death for their advantage. Assad in Syria seems to be leveraging the terror and the fear that comes from chemical weapons to try and subdue his opposition, killing women and children to remind them of his love of power.

Then the U.S. decides to remind Assad of our power, and we might feel that it is warranted to protect more Syrian children from sarin gas; and yet we also don't know, once we intervene, what collateral damage will come from our power and when it will stop.

In Jesus' case, the powers assume it will stop when they kill him.

'And when push comes to shove, we will crucify your "savior," to remind you of our "love."' Pilate commands the centurions to post a sign on Jesus' cross that reads, King of the Jews, to remind them what happens to those who pose a serious challenge to the empire's power.

3.

But the good news for us is two-fold. The first good news is that Jesus enters peacefully and more or less stays true to that peace and love throughout the week. In today's reading, we see that Jesus never truly mounts a violent insurrection. His ministry is certainly powerful in riling up the crowds, and he does flip a couple of tables over, but his intent seems to be less subversive in the sense of directly threatening the future of the Roman empire and more subversive in the sense of exposing the fallen nature of human authority. Jesus' crucifixion is the ultimate unmasking of those who in their power live by their human power and therefor are dying by their human power. Jesus reveals how all the violence in the world is really about people covering up their fears by using the power at their disposal, that these so-called powerful rulers are just spiritual children shouting I'm the king of the castle and you're the dirty rascal, children turning human lives into pawns: child's play gone all wrong.

God's authority at the end of the day doesn't come from fear or from wearing a fancy, bejeweled crown but instead from wearing the crown of real love and faithfulness to all God's people, which the

people at least momentarily and partially see at that triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. They abandon him, it's true, but first, Jesus' crown of love is his crown of thorns, which he gladly bears and which is glad and good news to us.

The other piece of good news is that despite the fact that the disciples and crowds eventually all betray, desert and/or deny Jesus, from their lips come the word Hosanna, or save us, that ironically are the words that Jesus fulfills on Easter. We know better, or at least we think we know better, than the fickle crowds who praise him on Sunday then condemn him by Friday. We too though are fickle, shouting or praying with thanks to God on Sunday morning and then denying God and running away from our walk with Jesus later in the week. God's grace though means that just as Jesus does not condemn those crowds at the parade, God also does not condemn us but forgives us after we fall away. God's grace lets us return to receive forgiveness and work toward better fulfilling God's hope in us, so that from Sunday to Sunday we might stay true. Christ's crown of love is unconditional, eternal, more permanent than any mortal crown, made of paper or of gold. On the donkey and on the cross, grace reigns in Christ's heart – both forgiving us and calling us to more perfect living.

Today God calls us the church to be Christian subversives in the sense of being more comfortable with peaceful protest and prophetic ministry than with masking our fear with power plays. For example, Christians commit themselves to the sustaining power of God's good creation. We can find a multitude of ways to honor God's creation by protesting the destruction of creation. We can expose the short-sidedness of our actions as a society, the ways that in the future we may see oceans rise and empires fall if we continue to use our electricity, gasoline, and other forms of power at our current rate.

We can protest ways that powerful forces exploit life, be it slavery or a lack of a living wage, we can protest death at all stages of life and injustice, we can unmask the forces within us and around us that enlarge unnecessary suffering. We can stand with those who suffer, find solace when we suffer because others stand with us. We stand with Jesus whose life, death and resurrection we celebrate this week –

He'll be back, from the dead  
 With the wounds from thorns upon his head  
 He'll be back, Sunday morn  
 We will celebrate with shouts and horn  
 Oceans rise, empires fall  
 God has loved us dearly through it all

So when push comes to shove  
 We'll crown Jesus as our King and Savior  
 when we follow him in love!  
 Da da da...

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<sup>i</sup> "You'll Be Back", *Hamilton: Original Broadway Cast Recording*. Written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, performed by Jonathan Groff.