

Matthew 21:1-11
March 29, 2026
Palm Sunday; Passion Sunday

Like many children of the 1990s (and, I suspect, of many generations before), I found Palm Sunday to be one of the most fun days of the church. The children's choir would gather on the porch, where we were handed long palm branches. The goal was always a sweet, melodic procession of children waving palms to the beat of "Hosanna, Sweet Hosanna." The result was always palm sword-fights, broken stems, and mass chaos. But no matter what mayhem we caused, the congregation always beamed at our arrival, happy to see the tradition continue.

Which, I think, is where I got the idea that everyone was happy to see Jesus. Our Palm Sunday liturgical practices were so steeped in praise that I missed entirely that the crowds in Jerusalem were not united in their acclaim. After all, I reasoned as a child, who wouldn't be happy to see Jesus? Especially on a cute little donkey?

But the Gospel of Matthew makes clear that not everyone was happy to see Jesus. In fact, the crowds that sing his praises seem to be the ones that have been gathering all along his ministry, or at least this latest leg of it. But inside Jerusalem, the emotional response is very different. "When he entered Jerusalem," the gospel tells us, "the whole city was in turmoil."

God is not afraid to interrupt, disrupt, shake up, or even frighten us. In this year in particular, with new wars and new worries, old wounds and old evils, continuing division and intensifying distrust in our communal life, I find myself caught up in the word "turmoil." The triumphal parade – with a humble leader and the cloaks strewn joyfully upon the road – seems like the fairytale, while a city, or church, or family, or world in turmoil is all too easy to imagine.

This word itself, it turns out, is a key piece of vocabulary. The Greek word that Matthew employs is *eseisthe*, a form of the root verb *seio*. It means to be both shaken and stirred, to be agitated, to be rattled, to be in turbulence and turmoil and trembling. This is a vivid and even violent verb.

It is also a relatively rare verb in our Scriptures. A form of *seio* is used only five times: once in Revelation, once in Hebrews, and the remaining three times here at the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew. Poignantly, each of its appearances in Matthew marks a turning moment in the story of Holy Week.

It appears first in Matthew 21:10, on Palm Sunday, *when* Jesus' entry into Jerusalem causes the city to shake with uncertainty and division. It appears secondly in Matthew 27:51, on Good Friday, *when* the whole earth shakes at the moment of Jesus' death. It appears for a third and final time in Matthew 28:4, on Easter morning, *when* the guards shake with fear at the sight of the angel who announces resurrection.

Now, if you're a Greek geek like me, this triple pattern is exciting all on its own. But I think that the author of Matthew is also deploying this verb as a set of theological paving stones. If you have a similar upbringing to me, you are inclined to look upon all agitation or disruption or disturbance as suspect. As a WASP, I am disinclined to make a scene, or take part in them.

Three times Matthew reminds us: God's power can shake the whole world. God's power can also remake it. But in these Holy Week scriptures, God makes scene after scene after scene. God is not afraid to interrupt, disrupt, shake up, or even frighten us. Three times Matthew reminds us: God's power can shake the whole world. God's power can also remake it.

Turmoil, it seems, is unavoidable. There is no sweet and simple **path** through this life. But we can choose whether we let the turmoil sweep us away from God, or break us open to God's presence with us. As we face turmoil in the world and turmoil in our faith, how can we penetrate through the chaos to see God's power still in action today?

Questions for reflection on Matthew 21:1-11

1. Consider the verb seio and its translations (agitation, turmoil, turbulence, rattling, shake-up, upset, trembling, stirring up, quaking). Which word catches at your heart today? Which word do you think would catch at your listener's hearts?
2. When have you seen "turmoil" lead to evil? When have you seen "turmoil" lead to good?
3. As you consider your own congregation's traditions around telling the salvation story, how can you help bridge any gap between Palm Sunday and Easter?

A Good Friday link will be sent for those who are unable to join us in person because of being a shut-in and/or because you are traveling. Of course, you as a traveler can check in on the local churches where you are visiting. Next weekend is the most important of the Christian year.

PALM SUNDAY - 10:00 WORSHIP

Maundy Thursday - 6:00 pot luck followed by reflection/prayer

Good Friday - 1:00 Walking the Last Hours of Jesus' Life

