

When I was in seminary, I had a chance to spend a summer working in South Africa as an intern for Alan Storey, the person who I consider my most important mentor. Alan's whole family was involved in non-violent resistance as part of the anti-apartheid struggle. He was the last political prisoner to be incarcerated before apartheid collapsed and Nelson Mandela was elected president. While there, I heard him tell this story. He said:

"My parents believed in nonviolence. So when I was a kid, they taught me not to fight. But like all kids, I didn't always listen and one time I did get into a fight when I was maybe 9 or 10 years old. But in the middle of the fight, I remembered my parents' teaching. I remembered that I wasn't supposed to fight. So I decided I would just stick my hands in the pocket so I couldn't use them to fight any more. And with my hands in my pocket, the person I was fighting hit me right in the face and bloodied my nose."

I'll come back to that story in a minute.

Today is Palm Sunday and it's often a celebratory day for many churches and it is for us too. I love seeing our kids come down the aisle waving their palm branches and hearing the children's choir sing. It's also often a day of fun. Many of you have fond memories of Adam Ochs wearing his donkey costume leading the palm processional. Or some of you may be planning to join our friends at East Church a little later for donkey rides. And we'll all enjoy the pancakes and sausage our men's groups has prepared for us in a little while.

These kinds of days are important in the life of a church. They create some of the most seminal memories our kids will have growing up in a church. These kinds of days remind us of why we like being a part of this community.

But I also think it's important for us to recognize that in many ways the way we celebrate Palm Sunday today is quite different than what happened on the event that this day commemorates. No doubt, it was a celebration. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey as crowds lined the streets, waving palm branches, throwing their coats on the ground, and shouting, "Hosanna," meaning, "God will save us."

But if we look a little more deeply, underneath the celebration was an ominous undertone. The story of Jesus entering Jerusalem with palm branches waving was the beginning of his last week before his execution, and what happened during that entry into Jerusalem would set in motion a series of events that would end with Jesus being nailed to a cross. So to really grasp all that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem meant, I want us to start near the end and work our way backwards.

It is the night before Jesus will be crucified. He has finished his last supper with his disciples and gone out into the Garden of Gethsemane. The soldiers come to arrest Jesus and the disciples all run away. Peter, who a few verses earlier, had promised that he was willing to die for Jesus, not only abandons him, but denies he even knows who Jesus is.

And because of this, the disciples, and especially Peter often get a bad rap. They're often portrayed as cowards, unwilling to stand with Jesus when he needed them the most. But I'm not sure that's completely fair. When the soldiers came for Jesus, his followers didn't immediately flee. In fact, they were ready to fight. Peter even pulled out a sword and attacked, slashing the ear of one of those who had come to arrest Jesus.

Immediately, Jesus jumps in and restores the peace, but if he hadn't, Peter was ready to risk his life to fight for Jesus. But Jesus had something completely different in mind.

After Peter lashed out with his sword, Jesus said, "No more of this. Don't you know that those who live by the sword, die by the sword." He then went on to say, "Don't you know that I could call out to God for an army of angels?" And whether you take Jesus literally or not about an army of angels, there's no doubt he could have summoned an army of peasants and fisherman and outcasts who were tired of being crushed by Rome.

You see, Peter and the disciples were ready to fight and die for Jesus. They weren't cowards at all. But that wasn't Jesus' mission. His mission wasn't to fight but it was to love even to the point of death. His mission was to love even those who were there to arrest him as he demonstrated by healing the ear of the person he attacked.

At our Maundy Thursday service this week, we will hear the full implications of Jesus' commitment to love. But for now, let me just say that what happens over the next few hours that will end with Jesus hanging on a cross is the pinnacle of Jesus' commitment to love no matter what.

The cross is the place where the unlimited love of God runs face first into the very worst of human sin and violence. And love wins. Jesus took the very worst humanity could inflict on him and still remain true to love.

On the cross, Jesus cries out, "God forgive them."

In the garden, Jesus heals the one who came to arrest him.

And as he does, he turns to his disciples and says, "No more of this. We will not fight. We will not hurt. No matter what they do to us, we will not try to hurt them."

But that was not easy path for Jesus to walk down. Before the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, we see him at his most troubled, his most anguished. He collapses on the ground. The gospel of Luke says that he was even sweating drops of blood. He's weeping and crying out to God, "Let this cup pass from me." How are we to make sense of this prayer, this cry to God?

Jesus doesn't want to die. He's asking God for a way out. But by this point, there was only one way out. After everything Jesus had done – the ways he had challenged the rich and powerful, the way he entered Jerusalem with the crowds welcoming him as a king, the way he went into

the temple and overturned the money changers' tables. After all of that, a confrontation was inevitable. The soldiers were coming. The only question left is how Jesus would respond.

He had a huge following. He had followers ready to fight for him. Maybe he didn't have to die after all. What if he could fight? What if he could win?

But there was just one problem. God sent Jesus to love...no matter what.

So with all of this in mind, let's go back to the way this last week of Jesus' life began, with Jesus riding in Jerusalem on a donkey with the crowds waving Palm branches and shouting Hosanna and ask ourselves why were the people so excited about Jesus' entry into the city and what were they expecting him to do.

First, we have to understand that the people of Jerusalem had experienced a lot of defeat throughout their history. For hundreds of years, empire after empire had defeated them in battle and gone on to rule over them. The people were sick of being conquered, sick of being oppressed. They wanted a king who could lead them to victory over the Romans.

And while the people had experienced defeat after defeat at the hands of their enemies, their ancestors had experienced one time when they didn't lose – one time, they won. When the Greeks ruled over them, the priest Judas Maccabee led a rebellion to try to drive them out. And guess what, they won. Maccabee drove out the Greeks and Judas came into Jerusalem riding victoriously on his war horse and guess what the crowds were doing – they were shouting and waving palm branches, just like in our Scripture, just like what they were doing when Jesus came into the city 200 years later.

When Jesus came riding into the city, the expectation was clear. The people thought he's riding into the city just like Judas Maccabees did. They thought he will drive out our enemies. And with that hope and expectation, the people responded just like their ancestors did when Judas Maccabee came riding into Jerusalem victoriously – they waved palm branches. They shouted "Hosanna."

But Jesus didn't come into the city riding in on a war horse, he came on a humble colt, a young donkey, a symbol of peace. This was not the king coming ready to do battle. This was a king coming in humility, coming in peace, coming in love.

Palm Sunday, and really all of Holy Week, asks the question of us, "Who do we really want Jesus to be?"

Do we want Jesus to be the king riding in on his war horse ready to vanquish our enemies? I'll admit that image is tempting at times. Sometimes I want a God who will wipe out all those that I consider to be evil doers.

But the moment we believe in a God who is willing to wipe out any of us, we have stopped believing in a God of unconditional love. Friends, during Holy Week, we will hear the stories that are the lynchpin of our faith. But let me be clear what this story means. The story of Holy Week, more than anything else, is the story of God's unconditional and unequivocal commitment to love, God's unconditional and unequivocal commitment to peace.

Back to my story. After Alan was hit in the face and his nose bloodied, he ran home to his parents. They hugged him. They made sure he was ok. And after telling this story, Alan asks the question, "Was it my parents' desire for me to get a bloody nose?"

"No," he says. They didn't want me to get a bloody nose. But they did want me to put my hands in my pockets. They did want me to not fight back.

Friends, I don't believe it was God's will for Jesus to suffer, but I do believe it was God's will for Jesus to put his hands in his pockets.

Amen.