

The Power of an Alternative Institution
For Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
March 29, 2026

Matthew 21:1-11

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.”^[a] **4** This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

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^[b] 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.”

—

People were gathered on a spring day in the city. It was joyful, exciting, crowded. Cloaks getting laid down in the road, blankets spread so people could watch. Children and old folk. People were waving palm branches and singing and shouting and calling for change, calling out, Save us, Hosanna. The people were waving and shouting out.

Your mind might go to yesterday, to people waving flags and banners, shouting and singing, crowding towns and cities all over. You could be forgiven for that association, it being so fresh in our minds, but I'm telling you a story from 2000 years ago.

I'm preaching about Jerusalem, the City of Peace that has never known peace, during the Pax Romana. It was a spring day in the early decades of the Common Era, a day of *two parades*.

In the city that day, there were:

Pilate and his soldiers

Temple authorities

The peasants and pilgrims come for the Passover

The zealots and rabble rousers

And Jesus, with his friends and followers.

Jerusalem was the center of Judaism, home of a re-built / soon to be destroyed temple. Home of temple priests who were also Roman appointees. The place where liberation was remembered and liberation was longed for. And every spring, preparations for the Passover evoked it all.

Going back long before, back to the days when Moses rode a donkey into the heart of Egypt on his way to liberate the Hebrews from slavery, the spring festival of the Passover celebrated divine liberation from oppressive earthly powers. You know, earthly rulers like to hold on to power so

Passover, at the Temple in Jerusalem, the place where Judaism was centered, made Rome a little tetchy.

Pilate led the first parade that day. He had come in from Caesaria Marina, the palace where the rich ruling class partied at the sea side. Marcus Borg wrote, "Pilate's imperial procession came into Jerusalem, "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses (horses were only used for war), foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold..the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums."¹

Rulers and military, coming in on war horses to intimidate the people. Your mind might go to shiny new SUVs with tinted windows, to armed agents roaming airports, with the news this week you could be forgiven for conflating these images in your mind but I'm telling you a story that's from 2000 years ago.

Rome had *power over* the people, and a *theology of power* that said the emperor was the son of God, and every governor, every soldier, every war horse was sent in God's name to maintain power over the empire, and that whatever Rome did was by divine plan and divine right. The Romans of the time practiced a way of war, of power over, a march of death. They proclaimed: we are the strongest and the greatest. Only we can save you. Our presence, our actions, are God-ordained.

There were also in Jerusalem that day temple authorities, perhaps they watched from the center of the city as Pilate marched in. The governors gave them power so there would be "Jewish" religious legitimacy for Rome's control. Lead your people, the Romans said, keep them safe by keeping them controlled, passive, and out of our way. If you do this, we will give *you* money and land - taken from peasants who couldn't pay their

¹ Kate Huey, quoting Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*. Borg and Crossan's book is an essential read.

Roman taxes - we will give *you* power and wealth as long as you cooperate.

There were *also* in the city that day, Jewish peasants including farmers who grew the food that went to the city, that went to the priests, that went to the soldiers; by the toil of their hands they created the wealth which fueled the Pax Romana but they did not keep it. Landholders who could not make ends meet and lost their land to empire and temple. Rural peasants were ninety percent of the population in the area around Jerusalem and they came, at Passover, to the city of their ancestor David, to Jerusalem the city of peace that gave them no peace in that time.

There were also in the city of peace that day, zealots and rabble rousers who sought to overthrow empire and *take* power with violence.

And then there was Jesus.

A Jewish teacher who came from the east from the countryside, from Galilee with the peasant class, on a donkey, with no horses or swords, no drums, no soldiers, no prestige, no intimidation, no might. No symbols of *power over*. Just people, peasants, pilgrims, disciples, calling out, Hosanna, Hosanna. Save us. Calling out for change.

Even *without* the symbols of war, the people called him to be king: palm branches and cloaks on the road - that's how, in Jewish tradition, they welcomed the king. The prophet Zechariah described the king the people expected: "victorious...ushering in a kingdom of peace, where all former enemies become equal members of the kingdom of God."²

Still the people expected Jesus to *take* power over. To defeat with violence the violence of Rome.

² Hosanna: A Spiritual Journey Through Holy Week by Carol Miller

But Jesus came with a different revolution in mind. Jesus came to build the *Kindom* of God, to preach the Way of Life. Not an earthly kingdom where one king / governor / emperor was just switched out for another king / governor / emperor.

For all the kingly symbolism, for all the donkey that sounded like a warhorse, Jesus wasn't there to win a battle or take a throne. Jesus had come to call out what was wrong, to protest and turn over the tables, but he wasn't there just to lead a march. He was there to inaugurate something brand new, and something so radical we still haven't finished building it. Jesus came into the city to shake things up completely, to inaugurate the already-but-not-yet-and also-always-building Kindom of God.

It is so much easier to tweak an existing system, than to set an entire system aside.

We can get our head around switching an emperor for a king, changing out who is on the throne.

It is so much easier to transfer power than it is to transform what power means.

But look what Jesus did, in Galilee and on the road and once he got into the city.

He healed people, he brought people into community, he forgave, he taught, he fed the hungry, he brought people from the margins into the center, he Loved.

Matthew says, Jesus was a prophet. Prophet Jesus, when he got into Jerusalem, hopped off that donkey and went right to the Temple.

And he turned the tables over.

The kindom he inaugurated wouldn't just slot in one power-hungry king for another. It would draw the people back to their roots in Jewish tradition and build something new. Jesus, turning over the tables, quotes Isaiah 56:

"It's written, My house will be called a house of prayer."

Go read Isaiah 56:4-8. God's house is a place of welcome, a place of inclusion. Where the foreigner is welcome, where there's gender diversity, where justice is practiced. *It's a house of prayer for all people*, Isaiah says. That sounds like the kindom of God Jesus was preaching and practicing and building in Galilee and Jerusalem. That sounds like the kindom of God Jesus gave everything for, it sounds like the kindom of God -

And this is not just a coincidence -

It sounds like the kindom of God that *we are called* to build right now.

Before heading to the Boston Common yesterday, I sat with a whole lot of religious folk. A speaker said, we have to build something different. We have to build relationships, community, support networks. This reflects our faith, this will keep us safe, this will support our courage as we go along.

A month ago I heard the same thing but with a fancy organizing name: "Alternative Institutions." They are key to non-violent community organizing. Alternative institutions go way beyond switching one ruler for another. They reimagine power structures in a more loving and egalitarian way. Alternative institutions find a way to take care of the people, instead of marginalizing and oppressing anyone.

Think about mutual aid networks in Minneapolis Saint Paul in January of this year.

Think about the early church - the original Alternative Institution, at least until Christianity became the religion of the empire.

-

After flipping the tables, Jesus went back to creating an alternative institution he called the Kindom of God.

“**14** People who were blind and lame came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them. **15** But when the leaders saw the amazing things he was doing and the children shouting in the temple, “*Hosanna* to the Son of David!” they were angry. **16** They said to Jesus, “Do you hear what these children are saying?”

Do you hear what these children are saying? That a totally different world is possible?

That would be scary for any ruler to hear.

Do we desire the praise of the powerful or the songs of children?³ Do we support earthly kingdoms or do we build up the kindom of God?

Kindom work may defy the structures of earthly authority but kindom building is also earthly.

Thy kindom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Waging peace,
welcoming the immigrant,
protecting our neighbors,
building access to healthcare,
healing the earth,
building beloved community -

these are earthly, kindom things. *Hard to imagine*, and what we must build *anyway*. And I hear you saying, Pilgrim Church can't do all that - dream bigger, I say. We are part of it, by God's grace.

³ This is a quote from Robb McCoy and Eric Fistler in their preaching podcast Pulpit Fiction, 2026.

Ooh, don't you know that when rulers on war horses, practitioners of violence, meet up with the Way of Life -

embodied in the form of the brave, nonviolent one, Jesus -

and lived out by today's kindom builders -

that's us -

- the powers that be get a little nervous, because the kindom of God will not fall to any earthly king. The kindom of God can change the rules and build something earthly rulers can't even imagine. The Way of Life overcomes the march of death. It was so 2000 years ago, and it is so today.

Hosanna, Save us! Amen. Amen.