

## **Palm Sunday 2026**

### **Caught in the Crosshairs**

Good morning Connection Family! And Happy Palm Sunday! Today, we are continuing our series, “Cross Roads: the way of Jesus.” And if you’re just jumping in today or need a quick refresh here is the journey we’ve been on this Lenten Season.

We started by looking at the **Crossroads of decision**, as Jesus asked His followers to deny themselves and take up their cross to follow Him. The next week, we talked about being **Crossed Out** with a really powerful message on forgiveness. Next we talked about times when we feel **Cross-Eyed** and the teachings Jesus had on anxiousness and worry. After that, we had a fabulous guest speaker, Rev. Grace Lucas, who shared how we can make disciples with those whom we **Cross Paths** with to advance God’s kingdom. And last week, we looked at times when we sometimes get our **Wires Crossed** when it comes to our priorities, pride, and motives.

Whew! That’s a lot of road covered in this short amount of time, and a lot of different “Crosses” to bear. Today, we’re going to look at another cross, and this one, can feel especially weighty and uncomfortable, so get ready. Today, we’re looking at what it felt like for Jesus to be **In the Crosshairs**, that Sunday He entered Jerusalem and the building pressure and persecution he faced.

But before we continue, let’s pray.

Not everyone likes to be the center of attention. Some people prefer to live the majority of their life under the radar, a wall flower in social situations. But some thrive and enjoy the release of dopamine they get from having all eyes on them.

For whichever side of the spectrum that you find yourself on, you probably have your reasons. Some of us maybe experienced something in childhood that pushed us to one side or another, whether it was an embarrassing moment that caused us to retreat and never want to feel that way again or a validating moment that stirred something within to seek to replicate that feeling. There could be million reasons why you feel the way you feel

about being the center of attention, but whatever the case, some people enjoy it and some feel uncomfortable by it.

Between David and I, can you guess which one doesn't like to be the center of attention and which one joined the cheerleading squad just so she could perform every Friday night at the football stadium?

No matter how much someone enjoys the spotlight, I think we can pretty much guarantee this- NO ONE wants to be at the center of attention, or in the spotlight, for something that they've done WRONG. For something that's not true about them or they're accused of. No one likes to feel that "caught in the cross hairs" feeling, that tension when all the eyes are judging and whispering and making up wrong assumptions about you. No one likes that.

Google defines this phrase we are using today-Caught in the Crosshairs to mean, "being the specific target of intense scrutiny, attack, or pressure from opposing sides or authorities." If the story of Palm Sunday doesn't perfectly fit that description, then I don't know what does.

But before we look at Jesus entry into Jerusalem in Matthew 21, I think to understand the gravity of this whole situation, we've got to look at what's going on leading up to this point.

As Jesus is entering Jerusalem, He is under this extreme kind of scrutiny and attack, He's caught in the cross hairs, maybe even more than we can really comprehend.

If you remember, during this time, political, social, and religious pressures were at an all-time high. The people of Judea were under the strict and oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. The Roman governors kept order by military force and heavy taxation. Many people were hoping for a political Messiah, a militaristic hero, who would come and overthrow Rome. Jesus was aware of this, and that's why right after he fed the 5,000 on the hillside and people begin to say that this has got to be "the guy", John says that Jesus leaves-

"Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." (John 6:15)

Jesus knew that was not the time and that would not have been a good idea.

Any popular leader gaining attention and drawing large crowds at that time could have been seen as a threat and a potential rebel by the Roman government, especially during an important and highly revered holiday such as Passover, when the people would be celebrating their liberation from another oppressor and the city would be overflowing with pilgrims coming to celebrate.

We also know that the conflict was growing bigger and bigger between Jesus and the religious authorities. The things that He was teaching were directly contradicting how the Pharisees and Sadducees interpreted the law and lived their lives. They had seen Jesus perform miracles on the Sabbath, commune with sinners, and openly rebuke them in front of the crowd. Like in Matthew 23, when He said:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Ouch. I’m not sure I would like the guy who said that about me either!

But the final inciting event, the ultimate trigger right before Passover was the amazing and very public miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This major display of divine authority sparked the people’s belief in who Jesus was as well as the religious leader’s fear of a revolt. After this miracle, the religious leaders gathered and began a plot to kill Jesus. So what does Jesus do again? John 11 tells us-

“ Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.”(John 11:54)

Again, Jesus is waiting for the appropriate time.

But Passover was coming, and the chief priests hoped to be able to catch Jesus amidst the festivities, and so John continues with telling us that-

“They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, “What do you think? Isn’t he coming to the festival at all?” But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him.” (John 11:56-57)

And so, it is with ALL of that tension swirling and building as more and more people hear about this miracle and this man, that Jesus does the most daring thing. Just DAYS after raising Lazarus back to life, Jesus enters Jerusalem, on a donkey. Whew!

Anyone feel like they understand that pressure and strain a little more, a little better now? Anyone feel like we kinda need to take a deep breath for Jesus? Like, this is not going to end well. This is not just a simple parade down the middle of town.

It’s a death march.

And yet, we know that’s exactly what Jesus does. Palm Sunday happens and He rides into Jerusalem, into the chaos and tension filled climate, in an overwhelming atmosphere of turmoil. He rides into into the thick of all, willingly.

Let’s look at the account of that triumphal entry in Matthew 21, through the lens of knowing what we know now:

“The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matt. 21:6-11)

This is a big deal. A provocative moment. This is serious. This is dangerous. Many things are coming to a head in this deceptively simple donkey ride through town. Everything about this display, from the donkey to the cloaks, to the words they shouted-all have so much symbolism and significance in the atmosphere that they're happening in.

Zechariah 9 says-

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...He will proclaim peace to the nations.” (Zech. 9:9-10)

Jesus' choice of transportation alone carries weight. He does this to fulfill the scripture, that the King, who everyone expected to be “righteous and victorious” was coming, but in the most lowly, and unexpected way. Not as a political leader or knight in shining armor leading them to war, but a servant leader, proclaiming peace.

What about the palms and cloaks they laid down? All accounts of Palm Sunday in the gospels mention this action, of laying down cloaks on the road. Why? To understand this, we can again look at the Old Testament, to a custom when another king was being appointed. In 2 Kings, the Lord anointed Jehu as King over Israel, and this is the people's response:

“They quickly took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, “Jehu is king!” (2 Kings 9:13)

This practice was acknowledging who Jesus was, the true King of Kings.

Lastly, as the crowd gathered, they shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”  
“Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matt. 21:9)

“Hosanna!” translated to English means, “Please save us.” Or “Save, we pray”. These words carried the confirmation that Jesus was what everyone was hoping He would be. The crowds are both hailing Jesus as King with shouts of praise and crying out for salvation.

John Wesley notes the possibility of people shouting this out in what he calls –“divine impulse” for many of them may not have even been fully aware of just what they were shouting, but they KNEW this man was different.

All of this makes Palm Sunday unique and terrifying- making this the first public and organized declaration of Jesus’ identity, the Messianic King. He had earlier revealed this to His disciples or small groups of people, but if you recall, He had asked them to remain silent, it wasn’t the right timing. He waited to reveal Himself, spending as much time as He could teaching and preaching before He knew His enemies would interrupt Him.

But on Palm Sunday, the doors were thrown wide open and Jesus confirmed everyone’s suspicions and hopes.

Here is the one who is going to save them. Here is the one they had been waiting for.

We can read this year after year, and even really examine it, but the question that’s really stirred with in me, is why? Why would Jesus do this like this? Why would He keep quiet and then suddenly at the height of everything, in the most tense and foreboding time, expose who He was?

The answer? Because- Jesus is love. Jesus is bold. Jesus is okay with being a little dangerous.

If we really want to be like Jesus, are we ok with being these things too?

Kevin KB Burgess, is a Christian rapper and pastor, he wrote the song “Church Clap” (anyone?!) and also a book called “Dangerous Jesus”. In it, he talks about how Jesus was not merely a safe or comforting figure, but a disruptive force, who challenged the status quo.

He writes,

“Somewhere along the way we traded following Jesus for creating a tame, moldable, silent Jesus who doesn’t mind following us. The church’s waning influence on the culture is directly connected to Jesus’ waning influence on the church.”

WOW.

We don't talk about Jesus like this a lot, but if we don't, we can miss the point, and not see the full impact. We, like Jesus, are called to this same kind of danger.

We are called to following God even when it's hard or dangerous. Even when we want to run away scared.

For a lot of us in modern day America, we don't REALLY have a category for religious persecution. But our friends in India, they get it. Our brothers and sisters in sub-Saharan Africa, where Christianity is growing at some of the highest rates we've ever seen, amongst persecution from large Islamic extremist groups-they get it.

But we're too ashamed to wear that shirt with a bible verse on it. We tuck out cross necklace in our shirt around a certain crowd. We can't be bothered to offer prayer to someone we meet who's struggling because it's too hard and we're just too embarrassed.

**Following Jesus is anything but safe.** It's anything but easy. **But following Jesus is EVERYTHING.**

I want to share with you one impactful story I read this week, in the forward of this book Dangerous Jesus, and it's from another Christian author and artist, Jackie Hill Perry-

Jackie was having a conversation with a woman who had been a Christian missionary in Turkey for over 20 years and wanted to know what Christianity was like in Istanbul versus America. The lady began to tell Jackie a story about a specific Easter Sunday. Leading up to that particular Sunday, anti-Christian groups were threatening to storm churches across the city with weapons and with rage. They had plans to kill everyone in the congregation and this included this woman, her husband, and their two children. So, they gathered one night to discuss this danger and everything that was headed their way. Of course, they felt fear and the need to make a plan and possibly even to just stay home from church that day. That of course would be the safest plan of action-nobody would get shot, nobody would lose a life, nobody would have to mourn a huge massacre.

But staying home would have been the easy tactic. So they prayed A LOT. And she remembered exactly what THIS specific Sunday, Easter Sunday meant. As she considered the men threatening to bring their guns to her church and what it might mean for her own body and the bodies she wanted to remain alive, she sensed the Spirit of God say, “Do you really believe in the Resurrection?” The all-wise God, through His Spirit unveiled the irony. Resurrection Sunday has always been a dangerous one.

This lady and her family showed up to church that morning and as they scanned the room, they realized that every single member of the congregation was there-ready to sing or die. In their case, either way was worship. The rage and the weapons ended up not coming that day but those people were ready to be like Jesus on that Resurrection Sunday.

WOW.

Stories like that are so inspiring and sobering, but also so distant and foreign to us. Most of us aren't in danger of being martyred on any given Sunday.

But **sometimes, the danger we are in is the danger we are to ourselves. The danger we create when we play it too safe.** The danger we fall into of simplifying and pruning Jesus into being just a fragile, complaint, nice person.

So be bold. Be different. Be dangerous- the way Jesus was. Love Jesus when it's hard, when it's inconvenient.

As we head into prayer, I want you to think: **Where in my life am I letting fear hold me back from following Jesus into the Crosshairs, when the pressure is on?**

**Ask your self, Am I willing to boldly serve Jesus?**

**Am I influencing the world or am I letting the world influence me?**

**Am I playing it just too safe?**

Let's pray.

Benediction thoughts:

As this story unfolds the rest of Holy Week, we'll be taking time to see Jesus go from the praises of Palm Sunday to the Last Supper, to crowds new shouts of "Crucify Him!" and ultimately to the cross.

But we can't rush or forget this very important week and all that it means. We can't rush to the resurrection when we truly haven't felt the weight of the cross, and everything that Jesus did for us.

Come back Thursday for the rest of the story, as we follow the Crossroads all the way to Calvary. Don't skip it. Come and join us.

And live dangerously this week!