

FPCU March 25, 2026 Palm Sunday Rev. Dr. Tina Blair
Our Contrary God

Text: Matthew 21:1-11

When my daughter was younger, we listened to a story on tape about Contrary Mary. Contrary Mary liked to do everything in a contrary, backward manner. She would say “yes” when she meant “no,” and she’d say “no,” when she meant “yes.” She would eat dessert first, then her main meal. She often wore her clothes on backward. At her birthday party, they brought out her birthday cake and all her friends sang, “Happy Birthday to You! Happy Birthday to You! Happy Birthday, dear Mary! Happy Birthday to You!” But everyone could see that Mary was not happy and had tears in her eyes! What could be wrong? Then her father had an inspiration: “Birthday Happy You to!” he sang. “Birthday Happy You to! Birthday Happy You to! Birthday Happy, Mary dear! Birthday Happy You to!” And Mary clapped her hands and laughed with joy.

This story comes to my mind when I meditate on how God chose to bring salvation to us. How God longs to redeem us and save us! The world is a mess! and unfortunately we contribute to this -- so we too long for God to save us, to bring us out of the pit of human mortality, out of pain and sorrow, out of our violence and wars, out of evil and death, into God’s holy goodness and light! We want God to swoop in with all of God’s power – the power that formed the galaxies and black holes and cells – and make everything right. And God did act. But what a contrary way to act! Is God just being like Contrary Mary, playing games? Or is there a deeper reality and purpose behind God’s actions? For God did not at all do what we humans would have expected. Think about it:

First of all, instead of remaining safely divine, immortal, and all-powerful, instead of manipulating and sending power from above, God jumped into the pit of human mortality with us. How do you get people out of a pit if you jump in and join them? And he didn't become an all-powerful, immediately fully grown and gifted human, like gods in other religions – instead God was born, in the blood and pain of the labor of a woman, God was born as a tiny, vulnerable, dependent baby. And not in the comfortable silk sheets in the stone house of a merchant or the marble palace of a king, but amid the rough straw and stinky manure of an animal barn.

Secondly, look at how God-as-man grew up – in a despised region of a despised nation occupied by a despised set of oppressors – son of a lowly carpenter. How contrary to human expectations can you get? And so it is with the whole story of Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, fully human – fully divine. As we follow his life on earth, we see how very contrary to our ways of thinking this life of God-on-earth was. In addition, the people he chose for followers were unimportant people as this world's reality would have it: they were poor or uneducated; they were demon-possessed until healed by Jesus or were seen as murderous oppressors until they were loved into repentance by Jesus. Yet this is how God chose to act and to use divine power! It makes us wonder: **what is power? What is true reality? What is our contrary God up to?**

The climax to all this contrariness begins today, as we come to the last week of God's human life on earth. And again, the scene is contrary to human expectations. Oh yes, over the years we have made it into a triumphal entry into the capital city, the holy city of Jerusalem. But look more closely at what really happened. Did Jesus ride in on a war stallion as a victorious King? No! He took a young colt of a donkey, the slow and steady transportation of a man of peace, not a victorious king, the same transportation his pregnant mother used going to Bethlehem. And who was it that cheered him as he passed by? Who tore off branches and laid down cloaks? The little people, children and others considered unimportant. The important religious leaders either pooh-poohed these shouts of joy or felt terribly threatened. And then God did the most unexpected contrary act of all: the Human-Divine One went to the cross, a criminal's sentence, and died. **The power of God to transform began – not with armies – but with the powerful act of sacrifice.**

Sometimes I am helped to understand what God does through stories, like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books, which I love, I admit (the books more than the movies). Tolkien was a devout Christian, a friend of C. S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers. He was

influenced by having fought in the worst battles in WWI and wrote much of these books during the rise of the Nazis and WWII. As a strong Christian, he brought many Christian themes to these stories. He paints a picture of what the motley community fighting for the Good, in other words, God's community, looks like. The Fellowship of the Ring, a group called together to save the world from the evil Sauron, consists of characters who normally never work together, and even dislike each other: the aloof elf, the dwarf who hated elves, the exiled king become a lonely Ranger and unsure of his calling to be king, a wizard whose wisdom is not enduring, a human prince who distrusted all of these groups, and most humbly, some Hobbits, little people with big feet. Was this not a reflection of the strange group of disciples Jesus put together? And in this story, the ones who wind up saving the day are the weakest and the most humble, and yet, the most stubborn and the most enduring and the most faithful in their quest – the Hobbits. Tolkien had this Christian message in mind as he wrote his book, and it is a powerful one, and one filled with hope, as the weak overturn the power of the strong Evil One. Contrary to all expectations, it is the Hobbits, the small and weak ones, who win over evil.

I hope this helps us make real in our own lives our understanding of what power really is and where it is found, as God sees it. Do you see how contrary this God is to the way human beings understand God? Are you able to get a glimpse of how this God turns all our notions of power upside down? As Samuel Wells, a Christian author puts it, Jesus' use of power transforms reality – and reality is not at all as we imagined it.

So what is the power that God uses? Why does God act in such a contrary manner? One word: **love**. Love is the power of God, love beyond our deepest longings and imaginings, love that is more passionate than all our passions, love that is more powerful than all powers, love that is more gentle than the gentlest caress, love that is more creative than the most splendid art. Love is the power of God, and this love created the universe, black holes and all; love created the lands and the oceans, love shaped the tiny, simple, one-celled animals and formed us, large, complex human beings. Love chose to work through humans, through humble, flawed disciples. Love chose to walk the road of the cross and die for us. And when God's Son died, reality turned upside down and was transformed, and the contrariness of God's power of love turned death into life; the contrariness of God's power caused an act of extreme sinfulness to become a source of salvation.

And this love is for the whole world – for everyone. That's what the Bible tells us:

“for God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son.” God’s love is for the whole world, not just the rich, the political or religious leaders, not just Republicans or Democrats, not just the Americans or the Europeans – but also the Palestinians, the Israelis, the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Venezuelans and the Cubans.

As we follow Jesus to the cross and beyond, we walk in God’s reality, not the world’s. And it strikes me that at the heart of God’s contrary power is the act of “walking with,” of being with us. God’s love was made manifest by choosing to be with us as a human; of walking life’s challenges with us from birth to death. God the Son experienced walking the dusty roads of his time and was homeless with no place to lay his head (as he said). He was with us as he experienced hunger and the need of others; he was with us as he lived in oppressive political times; and most of all he was with us as he experienced the injustice of his painful execution and death. In doing this, God’s Son broke the power of evil, and of sin and of death. In being with us, even through death, he has brought us new life and life eternal.

This is where our power lies also, in behaving lovingly by “walking with.” When we obey Christ’s teaching to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner, and welcome the alien, we are walking with and helping those in need. When we teach the children the ways of kindness, compassion and peace-making, shown to us by our Lord, we are walking with them and showing God’s love. When we protest in some manner acts of injustice large and small, we are echoing our Lord’s anger at the injustices of the moneychangers at the Temple.

You may still feel like you don’t have any power. Ah, but we have God’s contrary power! God even seems to prefer to use us, the weaker vessels, to spread God’s love, just like Tolkien demonstrated when a Hobbit overthrew Evil. You and I can make a difference in this world! You and I, even the “least” among us, can live in God’s reality and exercise the power that our contrary God gives us, the power of love. Let’s do that, reaching out as a congregation into this hurting world!

To begin to be part of this contrary reality of God, we must walk with Jesus this week. We walk with Jesus, the Christ, down the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem as he is welcomed with honor. We walk with him as he drives moneychangers out of the Temple, declaring that his Father’s house should be a house of prayer, not a den of thieves. We walk with him as he teaches with his biting, challenging stories and as he calls out the empty piety of the supposedly most religious groups – the Pharisees and Sadducees. We walk with him as he is anointed at Bethany, as

authorities plot against him, and as he plans his last meal with his disciples and friends, the Passover supper. We are with him as he kneels in agonizing prayer alone in the Garden. We walk with Jesus through this busy last week of his human life. We walk with him on the road of sacrifice.

We walk with our contrary God and the Son all the way to the cross. For by doing that, we will be able to walk with those who need us in the world to walk with them. By doing this, we will be walking with God, who overcomes death and brings us new life. Can you do that?

Matthew 21:1-11

21 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.” 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 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.”

