

Matthew 27:11-54
Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
March 29, 2026
The Rev. Katherine Bush

I've never been to the Holy Land. So, I've been looking at maps this week, tracing the likely path of Jesus from the Mount of Olives, through the city over the course of his several last days, all the way to Golgotha. Moving from one milestone to another, but all on a piece of paper or on my computer screen. I don't use paper maps as often anymore, what with the navigation lady who lives inside my phone offering turn-by-turn instructions. But I grew up with maps, the kind you could never fold back the right way, shoved in the pocket of the car door, and the larger atlases with pages of maps, zoomed in and zoomed out. And a favorite: books that had maps in the frontispiece. There was something so enticing about finding a book with a map on the inside cover, whether it was of an actual journey - some explorer's trek drawn out, or a map of a fantasyland like Narnia, or just a fictional town with all the homes and landmarks labeled.

Though it's all words and no pictures, today is a map. We have mapped the territory from the eastern edge of Jerusalem of Jesus' arrival in protest, to the high place where scholars believe the Romans often punished their adversaries. Standing here on Sunday with the story in our hand, we can walk the road of this week from the parade route with palms to a slow trudge with a cross. Of course, everyone in the story knew their way around town, but they surely had no idea where they were heading as they stood at the outset of this unholy, holy week. They could not have anticipated the twists and turns, nor could they possibly expect how everything would suddenly veer radically off course. Whatever ideas they had about what a journey alongside the Messiah would look like, it certainly never involved traveling through this hostile territory of betrayals and mockery and violence.

These were places they had to go though, much as they might have liked to skirt around that part of town or taken a shortcut to the end of the story. These were the places Jesus had to go because these were the places God chose to go, the places where God chooses to go. What we have in our hands, and so in our mind's eye, and now written in our hearts is a map of all the places that God will go. God goes to the crowded street festivals, and God goes to the empty gardens and midnight kangaroo courts. God goes to dinner with friends, and God goes to that aching place where friends abandon and betray. God goes to the physical limits of pain, torture, exhaustion, and then God keeps going all the way over the edge of the map into death.

With this trail map in our hands at the start of this strange week-long pilgrimage, we have a better sense of where we're going - better at least than Jesus' friends understood at the time. We can see what's coming from here, seeing the full tour as if from a bird's eye, with the entire view available to us before we take the first step. But more than an itinerary for these

next seven days, we have a map that will help us on those other sojourns, the ones when we can't see beyond the bend in the road. Because this isn't just a map of Jerusalem. It's a map of all the places that God goes. All those places we think God might not be or will at least be hard to find: in hospital rooms and in sleepless nights, in abandoned corners, in violent encounters, in moments of doubt. And when we, like his old friends, find ourselves wandering through places we didn't expect and frankly don't want to visit, we find the breadcrumbs there, left behind, that tell us that others have also come along this very way. We notice and understand that someone else has been here in this forsaken landscape, marking a trail with blazes and cairns. We see the well-worn rest stops that offer some momentary respite, and we might even glimpse some ticker-tape still littering the ground, leftover from the march. Because others have been here; in fact, God has been here.

Today we unfold the whole unholy, holy week; the map is laid out in front of us. This week offers us an unusual opportunity to see what lies ahead before it happens, and then to walk down that road, a practice run of sorts. So that we get familiar with the signposts and also the empty places, the pain and the taunting and the loneliness - learning somehow to recognize the snaking, unpredictable path that will indeed shape our own lives. No, it's not a perfect map of your life or mine, the geography is different, and even more it's a map that goes all the way to the precipice of death. But it is a story that shows us clearly all the places that God goes. And so when we march or trudge through the varied territory through which our lives will move, whether we want to travel there or not, we see that God has been right here too.