

“Here Comes the Son

Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:22-24

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church
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Have you ever been a part of a great street party? When our girls were little we took them to the Rose Parade in Pasadena, California on January first. There was even a time when I went around with a box and a neck strap selling Kodak film, trying to make a little money as a poor seminary student. The parade was a great spectacle, with what seems like a million spectators lining the streets. It's a crush of crowds, and a great spectacular show, launched by the Grand Marshall with much fanfare. Today, we consider another great show and think about what it means for us.

Last week we looked at Matthew 26 and the story of the Last Supper, which Jesus celebrated with his disciples in the Upper Room. This week we step back to chapter 21 and the story that took place on Palm Sunday. We call it the triumphal entry.

Since it was the time of Passover, Jerusalem and the whole area of Judea was crowded with pilgrims, people coming into the city to celebrate the great feast. The Passover regulations said there had to be a group of ten people for each Passover lamb. Records show from that time that a quarter of a million lambs were slaughtered each year, so that meant there must have been two and a half million people present for the feast. Every adult male Jew within 20 miles was supposed to come to the feast, and even Jews from surrounding countries made their way there. That was the time Jesus chose for his final public appearance, the setting for the last act of the great drama of Jesus' life.

People jamming the narrow streets, so many there you couldn't make your way through the crowd. Everyone there to make a sacrifice of a lamb, as the religious law in the Old Testament commanded. There were stalls with thousands of animals for sale. When the disciples crossed the Kidron Valley to drop from the Mount of Olives into the city, they must have seen them and pondered Jesus' words he would suffer and die in the Holy City. John records that when Jesus told his disciples it was time to go to Jerusalem, Thomas answered, "Let us go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16). Thomas and the disciples were fully aware of the danger they were walking into. Maybe they also remembered how John the Baptist had called Jesus, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And Jesus was going to the city to spill his blood in just a few days. They couldn't understand yet what that meant, or the fact that his death would be a new beginning of hope and life.

First, People Were Looking For A Savior.

What exactly was the crowd that showed up to acclaim Jesus looking for? Who did they think he was? After all, it was going to be only five days later, many in the same crowd would shout, "crucify him!"

Judea suffered under the humiliation of Roman occupation. They longed for God to send a Messiah who could save them from the Romans, to drive out the occupying army and bring political freedom.

The problem was that Rome was sensitive to the danger of insurrection, and didn't want popular leaders coming along and raising expectations of political freedom. Rome was ready to crush any threat—it's what would lead them to destroy the country forty years later—and that was above all what the Jewish religious leaders feared.

The leaders of the people, the chief priests and the Pharisees, were determined to eliminate Jesus as a threat to their nation. The religious leaders called a meeting of the council. It seems even they didn't dispute the fact that Jesus was performing many miracles, causing people to turn to him. Until now, when they had tried to arrest him, he eluded them. John tells us they said,

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked... “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (John 11:47b-48).

The Gospel writers tell us that the tensions and the expectations of Jesus had been building by the time he came into the city. People had been looking for him excitedly at the festival. And when word gets out that Jesus is coming, the crowds throng to see him. They do him royal homage and bow before the king. They put cloaks on the road for him to ride over, and they wave branches as they sing praise.

So, for many of the crowd, they wanted a political savior, a national liberator.

For some of them, it must have been the excitement of the spectacle. With the feeding of the 5000 or with his miraculous healings, Jesus' fame increased. His raising of Lazarus from the dead caused so much excitement that the leaders of the people even spoke of putting Lazarus to death because of the support his presence caused for Jesus.

If we judge by the response of people to his ministry, there were very few who had any inkling what Jesus was about. Even his disciples didn't understand until after Jesus had died and rose again. Matthew told us in chapter 16 that Peter had acclaimed Jesus as the Son of God, and immediately tried to convince him not to go to Jerusalem to give his life for our sins. It's like that still. Many people call themselves Christians, but really have no idea of who Jesus is or what his kingship means in their lives. Praising the king is good, but following his will in the world is even better.

Second, Jesus was publically declaring his identity.

On that tension-filled day, Jesus sent two of his disciples to get a donkey. Why did he do that? Matthew quotes the Old Testament to say,

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 'Say to the daughter of Zion [that is, to Israel], "Behold *your king* is coming to you"' (Zechariah 9:9)

That's a quote from the prophet Zechariah. Jesus was fulfilling a prophecy, showing who he was who he was by riding the donkey. He was saying, “Yes, I am the king.”

Now the people's response to Jesus' coming helps see how they understood his importance. They shouted out,

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"
 "Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9-10)

"Hosanna" meant, "God saves," and it was taken from the Hebrew phrase *Hoshya na*, and that means "Save, please!" It's was a cry for help— "O God, save us!" That phrase comes from the "hallel," the section of psalms from 113 through 118 that Israel sang during the Passover.

The branches were an old tradition that came from the feast of the booths. This feast helped the people remember the years when they wandered in the desert after the escape from Egypt. It celebrated the great saving acts of God's deliverance. John's Gospel tells us it was palm branches that people waved. That would be like waving an American flag for us today, because it was also a sign of national deliverance. In fact, during the time of the Maccabees in 165 BC the palm branch became the symbol for the Jewish independence.

Over time, the meaning of Hosanna changed. Psalm 118:26, said, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." So Hosanna became more than simply a cry for help. It became a shout of hope and celebration, a shout that "salvation has come!" It means, "It's here! Salvation is here! Salvation belongs to the Son of David, the king!" David was Israel's greatest king. But even the greatest human king fell short, and the people still longed for the one "who comes in the name of the Lord."

The prophet Malachi talked about the Messiah who would come,
 The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:1).

Jesus is the saving king, and one day the world will recognize his reign. John had a vision of that rule in the Book of Revelation:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Revelation 19:11-16)

Jesus will appear again one day as king, and his reign will be universal. He will come to judge the living and the dead, and he will defeat the armies of evil. When that happens, it will be too late to align ourselves with him. But as Paul says, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2) Jesus isn't just a tribal chief or a local ruler; King Jesus is the sovereign of the world, and he will shed his own blood to make a way for all who will receive him to receive mercy. He is the king who rescues sinners.

When Jesus accepts the people's praise and the waving of palm branches, he is saying that he is the Lord of the Temple who comes to bring the salvation of God. He's saying he fulfills the vision of Zechariah, because he's humble and gentle, and his offer to come to the house of God is global. Not only that, but he invites you to receive him as king.

A lot of people over the course of history have wanted to be the world's kind of king. Almost nineteen hundred years later, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II came to Jerusalem. He rode in with such pomp and show that they had to widen the Jaffe Gate to the Old City for him to ride in. After the parade had ended, someone climbed up and attached a sign to the gate. It said, "A better man than Wilhelm came through this city's gate. He rode on a donkey."

Throughout history, there have been a lot of men who wanted to be gods, but only one God who would be man.

Third, Jesus is the humble king.

Again, the quote from Zechariah:

"Behold your king is coming to you, gentle, *and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.*" (Zechariah 9:9)

Jesus is coming in humility. What a contrast! He is the king, as Jesus will declare at the end of Matthew's gospel, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He is the king not just of Israel, but for the world. The prophet Zechariah goes on to promise,

And He will speak peace to the nations; And his dominion [his kingship] will be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth (Zechariah 9:10).

Now, the people cry out as Jesus enters the city, "the Son of David," a name for the Messiah. He comes in the name of the Lord, in his authority and power. Many people misunderstood what that meant. They wanted political freedom, earthly power. But Jesus wasn't that kind of king. In four days, his enemies were going to drag him before the Roman governor Pilate, who asked him, "

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. (Matthew 27:11).

John tells us he went on,

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." (John 18:36)

He is a king, but he doesn't ride in pomp and circumstance, a military conqueror or a revolutionary. Jesus is the kind of king who wants to rule our hearts. He's the king who makes the first last, and the last first. Who brings the kingdom not by being served, but by serving, and giving his life as a ransom for many. A king who gets on his knees to wash his followers' feet.

He's the kind of king that doesn't just want outer conformity, but who wants a changed heart. Who doesn't just want dogged duty, but who wants our love. He's the humble king, gentle and riding on a donkey.

Fourth, Jesus is the kind of king who clears away what keeps us from God

The next passage in Matthew tells how the first thing Jesus does when he comes to publically declare his kingship is to drive out what keeps people from God. Verse 12 says,

Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. (Matthew 21:12)

Merchants had their stands set up in the court of the Gentiles in the Temple, making it so that Gentiles who came from all over the Roman world had no place for them to worship God. They sold sacrificial animals at inflated prices, taking advantage of the fact that worshipers didn't have any other choice. Not only that in order to buy an animal for sacrifice you had to exchange money for special Temple coins, because that's the only money merchants would accept. They were keeping others from worshipping, from connecting with God.

Jesus is angry when people exploit others who try to worship God. He's angry about all injustice and sin, and about whatever hurts people or keeps them from God. In his kingly authority, he can remove what keeps you from God. Won't you lay it down, and give yourself to him?

In Matthew 21:15 the chief priests become indignant over the acclamation of the crowd. When the children shout "Hosanna to the Son of David," they complain. Everybody's shouting it, but they especially notice what the children are saying. They challenge Jesus for accepting this praise. And Jesus answers, "Yes, I hear it." And he quotes Psalm 8, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise." (Psalm 8:2) And that doesn't mean that children are saying nice things about people, or complimenting grownups. The psalm says they are praising God himself, "O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is your name in all the earth." God has displayed his glory in the heavens. And Jesus is accepting that praise. Jesus accepts the praise of children as praise befitting God himself.

When Jesus rode into the city, he came with all the authority of God. He didn't come as a conquering warrior, sword in hand, not yet, but as a humble king, gentle and riding on a donkey. The king who came to save. One who wants us to know him, God among us. One who loves you so much, he came to die so he wouldn't have to lose you.

One day he will come on a war horse, judging evil and restoring justice. He will heal everyone who trusts him and receives him as Savior. Turn to him and live for him today.