

PALM SUNDAY

Victory of the Lamb Lutheran Church

A Different Kind of King

Matthew 21:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
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⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ 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!” ¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?” ¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”



In 2003, Stephen Prothero wrote a bestselling book called “American Jesus” in which he explores how, in his own words, “the Son of God became a national icon.” If that synopsis wasn’t sad enough, it gets more and more difficult to read as a Bible-believing Christian. The author doesn’t bash Jesus or Christian churches, but details how Jesus has devolved from the divine ruler of the universe to some enlightened sage, to a musical and theater superstar, a sales pitchman, and, well, just about everything in between. Why even many churches in America have bowed to pressures, trying to make Jesus more palatable by refusing to preach about sin or turning the world’s Savior into a morality program. And all this didn’t just start happening; it’s been going on throughout history—from Thomas Jefferson, who took a scissors to his New Testament to cut out all the miracles of Jesus that he couldn’t believe; to the Mormons, Jews, Buddhists and Muslims who have twisted and contorted Jesus to fit into their own traditions. It seems like everyone loves Jesus, just as long as they can define him on their own terms.

Jesus once asked his disciples, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and some say, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asked them, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” I offer that question to you today: Who do you think Jesus is? What does he mean to you? Simon Peter answered Jesus by saying, “You are the Messiah, Christ, the Son of the living God.” That’s a great answer, but we find out shortly after that Peter and the disciples still didn’t understand who Jesus was, even if they had correctly called him the Messiah. You might be surprised to hear that many people today also say I believe in Jesus Christ and yet have no idea who he really is. So perhaps before we decide who we think Jesus is, it might be wise to study the Bible together this morning and look at who Jesus reveals himself to be. Today we are going to take a look at a really interesting event in Matthew chapter 21, when Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And in this account we will see exactly who Jesus really is.

But first a little background: When Jesus started his public ministry he did many miracles throughout Judea, but as he moved south toward Jerusalem his miracles became less frequent, but more undeniable, if that’s possible. He healed a crippled man who had been in that condition for 38 years. This wasn’t some guy who pretended to have a broken leg and then just walked it off when Jesus winked his eye. No this man was known around town as a cripple and had been begging for food for 38 years, so when Jesus healed him there was no question that a miracle had been performed. Next Jesus healed the sight of a man who had been blind since birth. Again, this man could not have faked being blind his whole life, it was an indisputable miracle. Finally Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been dead four days, long enough that there was a foul odor when Jesus told them to roll the stone away. Yet Lazarus walked out of

that tomb and word spread far and wide. Jesus wasn't just an ordinary prophet and the people knew it. So when Jesus finally reached Jerusalem, his entrance into the holy city would confirm the suspicions and hopes of his followers.

We start in Matthew 21 with the first verse. ¹**As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."** These first few verses where Jesus explicitly asks for his disciples to borrow a donkey, may seem a little odd or mundane, but they are actually very important. What Jesus is about to do, he does intentionally. It wasn't an accident that Jesus rode on a donkey when he entered Jerusalem; this was something purposeful. There is great significance in this act. Look at verses 4 and 5. ⁴**This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵"Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"** This prophecy of Zechariah would have been near and dear to those ancient Hebrews. These words were written about 500 years before Jesus and foretell that a king would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey.

You know it's often noted on Palm Sunday that riding on a donkey is a humble thing for Jesus to do. And there is a sense of gentleness and humility here in Zechariah's prophecy. The prophecy points to a donkey which contrasts with the idea of warhorses and military pomp. The contrast is found in the context of Zechariah 9 where Zechariah sees the Messianic king "**humble and riding on a donkey**" (v.9) and then God declares "**I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem**" (v.10) So there is a sense of humility here in that Jesus didn't enter Jerusalem on a warhorse flanked by a bunch of soldiers, like a usual king would—but don't let that overshadow what a bold statement this was! When Jesus rode into the city on that donkey, he was throwing down the gauntlet. The operative words in the famous prophecy of Zechariah are "**See, your king comes to you...**"! This is a prophecy about a king.

Israel had had many kings in their history, but none so great as King David and his son King Solomon, who lived about 100 years before Jesus and 500 years before Zechariah's prophecy. As King David died, and you can read about this in 1 Kings 1, his son Solomon rode into Jerusalem on his father's donkey and was crowned king. This act is just packed with historic and prophetic significance! It is hard for us to know and for me to explain just how obvious and significant these connections were in the mind of those Jewish people in Jesus day, but there is no doubt that they knew what was going on here. Look at how they reacted, we pick it up in verse 6: ⁶**The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The 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!"** Those followers of Jesus knew what this meant. When Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, that day he fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy and claimed to be in the royal line of David. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey that day *he made himself a king.*

When I asked you earlier about who you think Jesus is, I wonder how many of you immediately thought of a king. I struggled with this while I studied this text because, maybe I'm different from you, but a king isn't the way I usually like to think about Jesus. I mean the idea of having a king doesn't really appeal to me; kings are out of style these days. We have presidents and other countries have prime ministers, and I know England still has a queen, but the traditional idea of a king just seems so domineering and obsolete in 2017. And yet Jesus here wants us to see him as a king.

Conversely, those people in Jesus' crowd just loved the idea of him being a king. They cherished the thought of a Davidic king finally reassuming the throne of Israel and driving out the Romans. Finally, we will be free; this land will be ours again. The messiah has come who will lead us in victory! The sad thing is that some of these people, not all, but some of them were the same people who said "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord," on Sunday, but on Friday that same week cried, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" It was the crowd of Jerusalem that brought Jesus in as their King, but when they found that he would not fight to assume the throne—that he spoke of a spiritual kingdom and not an earthly one—then they turned their back on him, saying, "Let his blood be on us and on our children." He's not the Messiah, he didn't try to fight. He's a fake.

It is hard to imagine turning so quickly on Jesus like they did, but I imagine many of them felt betrayed. They felt used and angry because they didn't understand who Jesus really was. And is that so different from our experience today? We often hail Jesus as our king, thinking that our earthly lives will be better because him. All of our problems will be solved and we will triumph! But when disaster strikes, when things get confusing, when injustice pops up in our lives,

when doing the right thing leads to suffering and sacrifice, well then we might have a hard time believing that Jesus is really a king. We want our life to go how we think it should and when things go wrong, well then God must not be in control, because certainly this isn't the best way to rule the world –“I'm getting pummeled here! I'm suffering! How can Jesus be king when terrorists are beheading Christians? How can Jesus be king when a kid at a school get shot. How can Jesus be king when I pray to him for so long and nothing happens?! How can Jesus be king when little kids get cancer? When someone I love dies? Where is Jesus then? Where is my king?! And in those moments, the devil comes to us and tells us to turn our backs on him just as many in the crowd did. And God forgive us for the times we have fallen into that temptation.

And God will forgive us, because Jesus is a different kind of king. You know when those crowds shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they didn't know right they were. The word “Hosanna” is a Hebrew word that means “Save.” They thought Jesus would save them from the Romans. Jesus didn't do that, but he did come to save. Jesus knew what was going to happen in Jerusalem that week. He knew that he was basically riding this donkey to the foot of the cross. He knew that those crowds would turn their backs on him and that pilot would allow them to condemn an innocent man. He knew that he would be beaten and flogged, that soldiers would dress him in a purple robe and press a crown of thorns into his skull. That they would spit on him and say, “Hail, King of the Jews.” I wonder what Jesus felt as he was riding into Jerusalem that day amid shouts of joy. It's interesting to think about.

Jesus is a different kind of king. We usually feel comfortable with the idea of Jesus as our king on a warm spring day like today when the sun is shining, the birds are chirping, and everything seems right. And certainly Jesus is ruling as king on a day like that, but there is another place that shows us what kind of a king Jesus really is. On a dark day, on a hill just outside of the city, we see a man suspended up on a cross. He is a strange man, a naked, bloodied wreck of a man, a man from whom men hide their faces. He is that disgusting to look at. Where is God in this wretched scene? He seems nowhere is nowhere to be found. If he is the king then how could he let this monstrosity happen to an innocent man!? And yet right there, right there as at nowhere else, Jesus is your king. A different kind of king than we expected, a different kind of king than we thought we wanted, but this crucified king is the only king who can actually save us.

And if you see your king there hanging on the cross, then you will also have the faith to know that Jesus is your king even during the darkest moments of your life. You will know that he is reigning for your eternal good even in the most confusing, angry, times of hardship. He is still your king and he still cares about you enough to die for you. In fact, if you look close enough, it is in those moments when things are the hardest, that you will be able to see most clearly the love of your king who is so well acquainted with sorrow and suffering. And it is those moments that you will also see most clearly what it really means to believe in Christ as your king and to hope in his heavenly kingdom.

A lot of people today have been misled into believing that Jesus' kingdom is meant only for this world, that somehow faith in Jesus is going to guarantee a good life here on earth. This type of preaching and this type of thinking has riddled the church in America. But that isn't the type of king that Jesus is. That's thinking too small and it isn't what the Bible teaches. Just think for a second if we take that this prosperity gospel to its logical conclusion. If Jesus is the king of the universe and he wants to simply provide us with a successful life here on earth, then look around you. How is he doing? He's doing a terrible job in my opinion. If Jesus' kingdom really was about this world, then every Christian should be successful and happy. We should be the leaders of all the countries of the world. I mean people would become Christian just as a matter of practicality! But Jesus said it many times, “My kingdom is not of this world.” He didn't have to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey; he didn't have to let them arrest him. Like he said in the garden of Gethsemane as he was getting arrested, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” He could have come down from the cross if he wanted, but he didn't because Jesus is not an earthly king. And thank God for that, because this world is not all there is. It is important for us as Christians to not get too wrapped up in it. Our kingdom is in heaven and our king waits for us there.

That being said, Jesus does make our lives better on earth, maybe not from a material or physical standpoint, but if he is our king then we have hope and meaning everyday of our lives. And yes, we will bear some heavy crosses and Jesus doesn't promise that we won't have to deal with them, but he does promise to give us the strength and faith to stand up underneath them. And in the end he will bring us to heaven where we will spend all eternity in unending joy with our king. If that promise doesn't make your life better right now, then nothing ever will.

I'll finish today by looking at the last two verses of our text: ¹⁰ **When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”** ¹¹ **The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”** There may be those who ask you, when they see the evidence of Jesus' kingdom in your life, “Who is this man?” Just like many asked on that first Palm Sunday 2000 years ago. I think people will always be asking that about Jesus. It is

my prayer that you can tell them who Jesus really is. He is a king who reigns in splendor and glory, but he is different kind of king as well. A king who died out of love for his people; a king who rules in the hearts and lives of his people each day and is always with them; a king who is truly worthy of the words spoken by the crowd, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven.

Amen.

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Peter Schlicht
schlichp@wls.wels.net