

The King We Need

Matthew 21:1-11

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For the past few weeks, we have focused our messages on fighting fear and worry and trusting in God. The reason is obvious with this crisis that has altered so much of life in our community. We are learning in ways we have never have before how to trust God, pray in the midst of real needs, and continue to function when life is restrictive. I urge us to completely trust in God while doing all we can to love, and serve, and provide for our families and community.

When this started going down, I told the staff about one of my favorite movie moments in *Apollo 13* when NASA was grappling with how they were going to get those astronauts home and prevent them from dying. The director, played by Ed Harris, overhears his associates whispering how this will be the worst disaster NASA has ever experienced. The NASA Director turns to them and says, with all do respect sir, I think this will be our finest hour.

Faith doesn't make us passive. Psalm 20:7 says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." This is what we need as a country and as a church—the keen vision through the grid of God's promises to see these days of quarantine and fear and financial loss and death as the greatest opportunity God has ever provided in our lifetimes. With God's promises in your heart, can you look that fear in the eye and say, *with all due respect sir, I think this will be our finest hour?*

Today is Palm Sunday. The Christian calendar has served for centuries to provide us with these rhythms of celebration. This is particularly helpful when life is chaotic or scary. They calm us and remind us what God has done through Jesus. We need this now like never before in our lives. So, for these two weekends, we are going to remind our hearts of what Jesus did for us. Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday.

There was great identity confusion surrounding Jesus. Of course, God the Father knew who he was and thundered his identity at his baptism and transfiguration and the demons regularly identify him as the Son of God. Everyone else was somewhere between disdaining him as the Pharisees did or deeply admiring him as a great prophet as Mary Magdalene did. All the while Jesus kept his true identity just out of view. He regularly told people he healed not to tell anyone. Jesus was not looking to build a platform for himself or make a name for himself. To the contrary, when people started to glimpse his true greatness and want to enthrone him as king, he would walk away (John 6:15).

He did this until one particular Sunday where he finally presented himself to Israel as King. Only he did it like he did everything else—the opposite of what we could expect.

The Preparation

"Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once.'" (Matthew 21:1-3 ESV)

Matthew has been building anticipation of this moment beginning back in 16:21. There Jesus foretells what is about to happen:

"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Matthew 16:21)

Jesus was not a victim of circumstances; he went to Jerusalem by his own purpose and design. As he journeys, he passes through Jericho and begins the long road up that leads from Jericho down by the Dead Sea all the way up to Jerusalem. As they draw near Jesus tells two disciples to go and acquire a donkey and her young foal.

As Matthew often does, he tells us what happened and then connects it with Old Testament prophecy. So, what does a donkey have to do with Jesus messiahship?

The Prophecy

*"This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,
"Say to the daughter of Zion,
'Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"* (Matthew 21:4-5)

This prophecy is a combination of Isaiah 62:11 and most of it is Zechariah 9:9.

Your king is coming to you. What could be more exciting than the king comes? The king returns. Zechariah 9 goes on to describe the power and glory of the king that comes.

*"...And he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth."* (Zechariah 9:10)

What king in all history has ever ruled to the ends of the earth? No king Israel ever knew—not even David or Solomon. Not Alexander the Great. Not Rome. Not Charlemagne or Napoleon. Not the British Empire. No king as has ever ruled all the ends of the earth. Zechariah prophesies there will be one. That King? He is coming to you.

But how does he come? What would you expect for a king of this greatness? Kings come into their capital in glory and power. The emperors of Rome would come in after a great battle at the head of the army, riding a symbol of power. A gold chariot. A white stallion. Probably the closest monarchy we have to compare is Queen Elizabeth and her family. Do you remember how Diana came to the wedding? Gilded chariot. White steeds. Everything bejeweled and glittering. At the very least, think of our president and the symbolic power of Air Force One or the black ultra-outfitted presidential limousine.

Every king and ruler of any significance in all of human history projects his power and purpose and significance. The armies that follow or F-15s that fly overhead are all saying something. *I am really important. I am powerful. I am here to rule over you.*

But Jesus, the King of all kings chooses the last animal you'd expect for him to ride on his coronation. Not just a donkey, but Matthew notes there were two donkeys. A mature female mommy donkey and a foal. A colt. A baby donkey. Both were there; Jesus rides the colt.

Why? It demonstrated the values of his kingdom. The character of his kingdom. They are all the opposite of the kings and queens and presidents in the kingdom of man. What better way to highlight the values of his kingdom than to present yourself as king of Israel riding the newborn foal of a donkey?

"Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey." (Matthew 21:5)

This would be like the new President of the United States coming into Washington DC for inauguration on a moped. Jesus intentionally chose his mode of transportation. He wanted to fulfill the prophecy, and by doing so, unveil to those with prophetic eyes just who he really is.

The Coronation

"They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'" (Matthew 21:7-9)

This is Passover week—the biggest feast, festival, and religious holiday of the year. Estimates claim as many as 2 million people would pack into Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Many of them would have been Galilean pilgrims just like Jesus. Walking that same road. They knew all about Jesus as his ministry had been mostly up north in Galilee. John adds something interesting to what's going on here.

"The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him." (John 12:17-19)

There are two crowds converging in this scene. The crowd that comes from outside the city (they are the pilgrims who have come) and residents outside the city walls. Everyone is talking about Jesus and specifically talking about his most recent miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead. Where did Lazarus live? Bethany. Just outside of Jerusalem. Jesus' other miracles were largely done among the hicks of Galilee. The sophisticated Jerusalemites easily dismissed them.

But Lazarus was one of them. Jesus raised the dead in their backyard. Is it possible that Lazarus was with this crowd, walking next to Jesus on his donkey?

The energy was palatable. Think of the energy in the parade for sports teams when they win a championship. Some of you were probably at the Cubs parade in 2016. Euphoria! What did they do? Hit a ball and ran fast. Imagine the jubilation for someone who actually raised the dead back to life! What's that crowd like?

Jesus gets on the donkey. Begins to ride down the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives is one of the overlooking hilltops just east of Jerusalem. Here is a modern photo of the view from the Mount (see below):



The people who are traveling into the city along with his disciples start to get it. They begin to do for Jesus what their culture did for royalty. They took off their coats and spread them on the path so that every step was honored. We do a red carpet. They put their own coats down. They cut off palm tree branches and wave them on both sides as he passed through.

They shout and sing from the Psalms. *Hosanna!* Literally, "God save me" or "God saves." Psalm 118:26, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!*" Remember there is no background noise of cars on the interstate or the hum of commerce. The sound of this shouting would have cascaded down into the city of Jerusalem. *What's going on? What's this about? It's Jesus of Nazareth, he is coming!*

So, the massive and swelling crowd coming down the mountainside is being met by a surge of crowds coming from inside the city. This was no orderly event. It was absolute chaos and confusion. It was joy and gladness and singing. It was an epic event. So epic that the Pharisees see the scene and they say, *A lot of good our efforts are doing, look the whole world is falling at his feet.*

All this leads to the real question. What's the point? Why? Why a triumphal entry into Jerusalem like this?

The Purpose

"And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, 'Who is this?' And the crowds said, 'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.'" (Matthew 21:10-11)

The whole city was stirred. The Greek word for *stirred* is the root of our word "seismic." The city was shaking. Rocking and rolling. This didn't happen quietly or just for Jesus' followers. That Sunday exploded with emotion and fervor so much so that the city was seismic. Clearly, this was intentional and planned by Jesus. For what?

*"But the ride on a colt, because it was planned, could only be an acted parable, a deliberate act of symbolic self-disclosure for those with eyes to see or, after the Resurrection, with memories by which to remember and integrate the events of the preceding weeks and years. Secrecy was being lifted."*¹ (D.A. Carson)

What do you think of when you see Air Force One? President of the United States. The ride tells you who it is. 500 years prior, a prophet gave a sign. *Here is how you will know that the great King has arrived. He will come to you riding on a donkey.* It was a sign. Just like the angels said, *you'll know it's him if you find him lying in a manger.* Nobody puts babies in a manger and great kings don't ride donkeys.

Did the people get it? Not really. Yes, there was excitement, but listen to their answer when someone asks, who is this? *"And the crowds said, 'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.'"* (Matthew 21:11)

What's the problem with that answer? Was his name Jesus? Yes. Was he from Nazareth? Yes. Was he a prophet? Yes. All true. What's missing? What they missed that day is the same thing many people in hell someday will testify, *I knew Jesus was great, but I didn't realize he was that great!*

Jesus a prophet? Yes, but no. He is so much more than a prophet. A great teacher? Yes, but so much more than a great teacher. A miracle worker? Yes, but so much more than a miracle worker. He is the King of all kings. He didn't ride the donkey to announce he was a prophet; he rode the donkey to announce he was the king AND to show the nature of his kingdom as he comes to his people in humility. A servant. A messiah. A Savior.

For all their excitement, the crowds missed it. Why? They realized he was their prophet but not that he was their king. Just days later, very near to this same spot outside the city, many of these same people would see him crucified and die. The ultimate act of love and humility only hinted at by riding into Jerusalem on a baby donkey. The triumphal entry was Jesus' final and very public statement to the whole nation right there in the capital on the biggest stage possible: *I am the King.*

Did he know those people singing and shouting still wouldn't get it? Of course. Then why did he do it?

I believe Jesus did it for the millions who weren't there that day. For the people who would investigate his life and claims to be Messiah and Savior. Looking back, even his disciples would connect the dots and realize that he was a descendant of David. Born in Bethlehem. Rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus puts into his story a hard-to-miss, prophetically fulfilling clue to his real identity.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Matthew, Vol. 2 (Ch. 13-28), The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 437.

Palm Sunday. Is it about the donkey? Is it about palm branches? Is it about the shouting and singing? The size of the crowds? No. It is about him. Jesus intentionally fulfills the prophecy to say unmistakably to Israel and to us, *This is who I am. I am the King whose reign shall stretch from shore to shore forever.*

What do you believe about Jesus? Who is he in your estimation? A great man? Great teacher? Even maybe a prophet of God? The crowd believed all that. They didn't realize he was more than a Galilean. More than a Nazarene. More than a prophet. More than a miracle worker. He was and is and forever will be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Is he your king?

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