

The Son of David Comes to Save Us

Matthew 21:1-11

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Hymn: "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth," ELH #331

Let us pray: "'Hosanna in the highest!' That ancient song we sing: For Christ is our Redeemer, The Lord of heav'n, our King. O may we ever praise Him With heart and life and voice And in His blissful presence Eternally rejoice!" (ELH #279:3). Amen.

Matthew 21:1-9 (10-11, ESV)

21As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²telling them, "Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. ⁷They brought the

donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. ⁸A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. ⁹The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting,

Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is he who comes in
the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest!

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

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Dear people of the Son of David,

No doubt many of you have dear memories of Palm Sundays past, when your children were young and processed into the sanctuary with palm branches, singing hymns of *Hosanna*. It's exciting, too, because it's just one week before the highest

festival of Easter! Such pleasant memories are special and should indeed be held close to your hearts, but, if you'll permit the advice, not at the expense of a true understanding of what this Sunday is all about. We should beware falling into the same trap as those people in Jerusalem who praised Jesus on the first day of the week, but come Friday they were either silent or shouted, "Crucify him!" Are we fair-weather followers of Christ? Do we delight to see him when he is full of majesty, praised as our king, pictured as a gentle shepherd, surrounded by the voices of children and our families are all together in peace and happiness; but then depart or become despondent when he is bloody and hanging on a tree, when our children and families are in disarray and our homes are destroyed, when things go wrong, when it seems we're alone in the world?

What Palm Sunday teaches us is what the whole life of Christ teaches us, i.e. the purpose for his coming: **the Son of David comes to save us**. In this capacity **he is both the mighty prophet and king, and the priest and sacrifice for sin**.

I. He Is the Mighty Prophet and King

There is so much paradox wrapped up in this account. Jesus is hailed as a mighty king, but he comes "humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." And even amidst that lowliness, he yet demonstrates his power, for notice what he told his disciples: "Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

What did the disciples find? The donkey and her colt, just as Jesus said. Jesus demonstrates that he is truly a prophet.

And what of Jesus' word: "If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once"? Mark records the interchange: "And some of those standing there said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go" (Mark 11:5-6, ESV). Not only is Jesus' word prophetic, but it is powerful. Even at a distance, even through the mouths of others, his word accomplishes his purposes.

This demonstrates the power of Jesus' word as the power of both prophet and king. Kings send messengers to carry their word, and when those messengers deliver the word, it is obeyed as though the king himself stood speaking that word. This has some heavy implications. If Jesus' word carries such power even when it is not spoken directly from his human lips but is spoken through others, then what does that mean for the sermons I preach? What does that mean for the Bible Studies I teach? What does that mean for the family devotions you have at home? What does that mean for the Good News you share with your neighbors? In each instance, when the speaker delivers the message of Christ, the Word spoken has a power outside the speaker himself: it has the power of Christ, and wherever that Word is spoken, there will be those who hear and obey. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Is. 55:10-
11, ESV)

“So,” as St. Paul says, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17, ESV).

What is even more remarkable about the word of Christ is that it is far greater than any other prophet’s word. Notice the proximity of these two prophecies: First, the word of the prophet Zechariah, “This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” Second, the word of the prophet Jesus, “Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me”; “The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt.” The commonality of both of these prophecies is that *Jesus is the fulfillment*. No other prophet is the fulfillment of his own prophecies, but they all pointed to something greater, namely, Jesus. Jesus’ whole life, including this incident, is to fulfill God’s Word through the prophets. All the prophets of the Old Testament told of Jesus’ day. Jesus’ prophecies throughout his life also told of things that he himself would do: how he would go to Jerusalem how he would die, how he would rise, how he would ascend into heaven, and how he would return.

You’ve heard of Christmas that “Jesus is the reason for the season”? It’s a cute phrase, but I think it’s far too limited. Jesus is the reason for *all things and all times*. He’s the reason for our Christmas celebrations, he’s the reason for our Palm Sunday

observances, he's the reason for our lives. There's a liturgical connection here, too: this Gospel text occurs twice in the Church Year, maybe you noticed. Palm Sunday is actually its second occurrence. The first is the very first Sunday of the Church Year: Advent 1, which prepares us for Jesus' coming to us; Palm Sunday, the very last Sunday before Easter, prepares us as Jesus makes his way to the cross. The *coming* of Christ, with his purposes both somber and joyful, pervades the whole year. The joy of the first, as we anticipate Christmas, and the bitterness of the second, as we anticipate his death, are mingled in both.

We understand this mingling only in hindsight, however. The people present at Jesus' entrance were full of pure excitement as they laid palm branches and their own coats on the ground before him. They hailed him as a King – notably the first time in his earthly life that Jesus allowed people to honor him as a King. At the same time, there were the Pharisees, and we can almost picture them hiding in the shadows, plotting their overthrow of Christ.

We look back and know that this procession into Jerusalem led directly to Jesus' death. We still sing the song the people sang: "Hosanna!", but we sing it in preparation for Holy Communion, in which we eat that body that died on the cross and drink the blood that spilt from Jesus' side: and "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's *death* until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26, ESV). Driving, driving, driving, Jesus picks up momentum until this purpose: in expectation of something mighty and heroic, we are instead greeted by quietness, softness, humility, and defeat. As we also sing in our Communion liturgy: "O Christ, the Lamb of God, You take away

the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.”¹ You can think of our whole Communion liturgy as a reenactment of Holy Week: We sing the Hosanna greeting to our Lord as we enter the liturgy; we enter the Temple where Jesus drove out the moneychangers, and we pray the prayer which asks him to drive out the wickedness from our hearts: “forgive us our trespasses...deliver us from evil”; we repeat the Word of Institution which Jesus spoke on Maundy Thursday, the night he was betrayed; we hail the Lamb of God who, as Gerhardt’s great hymn sings:

goes uncomplaining forth,
The guilt of all men bearing;
And laden with the sins of earth,
None else the burden sharing!
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint,
To slaughter led without complaint,
That spotless life to offer;
Bears shame and stripes, and wounds and death,
Anguish and mockery, and saith,
“Willing all this I suffer.”²

And after receiving, we sing with joy of how we are, on account of this sacrifice and gift, enabled to “depart in peace.” This is the joyful expectation of our resurrection, for we have seen the salvation Jesus won and offers through *his* resurrection.

II. He Is the Priest and Sacrifice for Sin

Is this in our minds each time we come to worship? Do we come to the service with the purpose of Christ in mind? Do we leave the service with a grasp on what Jesus accomplished? Again, for many, it is far easier to be fair-weather Christians, to turn to Jesus when it is fun or joyful or easy or, God forbid, *convenient*.

¹ ELH p. 79-80.

² ELH #331:1.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem “humble, and riding on a donkey,” when even yet his humility was not the focus of people but his might was,

So He comes today: His purpose is to bring salvation and blessedness, to heal men and to make them whole and healthy, to set up a spiritual kingdom that will last forever. He looks as little like a King as ever. In His Church are many who shout Hosanna on Sunday and run from the Garden on Thursday night. Many spread tender devotional statements before Him and call Him Savior, Prince of Peace, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, but refuse to do His will in family or business or international relationships. Many vow allegiance like Peter and then deny. Many dispute who is greatest and think it extravagant to wash men’s weary feet.³

Has the church never meant something to you that it shouldn’t? Such as, has church meant to you a place for family to gather? Has it meant to you that *you* were Christian while the Muslim countries or immigrants were less? Has it meant to you that you could expect a certain level of respect among your family and friends and business acquaintances because *you* go to church?

Has church meant to you that you could do what you want? Or has it meant that you could lord it over other people that you know that they can’t do what they want?

The gleam of divine power is attractive to many. But if that is all we see, we miss the point—the *purpose* for Jesus’ coming: “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). On this ride into Jerusalem, as I said, this was the only occasion Jesus allowed people to praise him as a King in his earthly life. When Pilate asked Jesus, “‘So you are a king?’” Jesus answered, ‘You say

³ Fred. H. Lindemann, *The Sermon and the Propers*, Volume II: Pre-Lent to Pentecost (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 99.

that I am a king” (John 18:37, ESV). Jesus does not *claim* or *take* kingship for himself, and this is because his “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36, ESV). He allows the people to praise him as King as he enters Jerusalem, because they see the King on his way to his throne. The following week is all preparation for the coronation ceremony, and Jesus knows it is a ceremony contrary to expectations.

This is not a king who rides in conquering. He is not a king who wishes to give you a sense of self-righteousness. He is the opposite. He is a king with his own righteousness, whose subjects are all not only prisoners needing to be freed, but rebels and enemies who need to be vanquished. Yes, self-righteousness has no place here, because you are an enemy of this King who rides into Jerusalem. Standing before him, where is your self-righteousness? Where is your pride and your thinking that you’re better than anyone else? Where is your insistence upon what *you* want?

Before this King, you stand condemned.

But blessedly, this King came with that purpose: his righteousness is given to us. This is because he comes with the purpose to sacrifice himself on the cross. This King, who is the only human being who ever lived who *could* be self-righteous “did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed” (Phil 2:6). This King took up the role of a priest—the role of paying for the sins of others. A priest is arguably the filthiest person in society: think about this in Jewish context. The priest would sacrifice thousands of animals, cover himself in in the blood of beasts, place his hands on those which were doomed to die. The priest would even be the only one who worked on the Sabbath, *breaking* the Law of God for the sake of others.

But that's not enough, because this King is not only the Priest, but also the Sacrifice. In a hymn by Isaac Watts, we sing,

My faith would lay its hand
On that dear head of Thine
While like a penitent I stand
And there confess my sin.⁴

Jesus is the full sacrifice for sin, taking all our sins upon himself. But we must acknowledge that *we are sinful* and *helpless* without him. The remarkable thing is that Jesus, knowing how great he was, nevertheless gave up everything and made himself nothing. We, knowing how we are nothing, receive from Jesus everything.

Here is where that song, "Hosanna!" comes into play. This is a Hebrew word, really a pair of words: הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. The first word means "save us," and is related to the Hebrew name for Jesus: Joshua. The second word, נָא, means "please." Now, those victorious crowds who praise Jesus as he rides in shouting, "Hosanna!" they take on a different timbre, don't they? If instead of shouting with joy and victory, "Hosanna!" They were shouting, "Save us, please!" that sounds more like the desperation of a people in need. That is exactly what they were shouting, but did they know what it meant? I won't spend any time judging the faith of others, but instead advise you: *know* what it is you say when you come to church, when you confess your sins, and your faith. *Know* what it means that this King comes riding in to greet you, coming in lowliness, in humility. He comes not with fire and earthquakes – not any longer. He

⁴ ELH #305:3.

comes in a dusty old book, in water, in bread and wine. On the one hand, this ought to teach *us* humility.

On the other hand, and of far greater importance, this demonstrates the great love of God, that he sent his Son to die for us, that the great prophet of God, our great and mighty King, the Son of David, put on also the robes of a priest, and shed his own blood—God died, to save us.

Follow Jesus this week on his way into Jerusalem: as Jesus spent the week teaching and proclaiming God’s truth, spend your time in that truth, hearing the Word of God; as Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room to feed them his body and blood, gather with fellow Christians to receive that great gift; as Jesus paid the ultimate price on Calvary’s cross on Friday night, gather beneath the cross to see the love of God bleeding; as Jesus rested in the tomb that Sabbath Saturday, rest, with eager anticipation until the rising of Christ at the break of the third day; as Jesus rose on Easter morning, rise with joy at the salvation we have all been given, and meet him in the room where his disciples gather together, in his church. Holy Week provides a magnificent opportunity for God’s people to receive the gifts offered, because the Son of David came to save us.

Amen.

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