

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 28, 2021
Palm Sunday**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
COMING TO JERUSALEM**

Luke 18:28-44

We have only just begun our travels with Jesus in the Gospels, and already it is Palm Sunday, the day in which we recall the triumphant arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem to the “Hosannas’ and “Hallelujahs’ of a large, exuberant crowd of onlookers who lined the road from the village of Bethany leading to the Holy City of Jerusalem, along with the followers of Jesus who joined Him in this public parade to announce the coming of Israel’s long-awaited Messiah-King. After Easter, we will retrace some of the travels of Jesus preceding His arrival in Jerusalem at the beginning of the most decisive week of His life and ministry – in fact, the most decisive, climactic week in all of history.

Pastor Chris spoke last Sunday about “The Stories We Tell.” We all have stories to tell. I told you last summer about some of the most embarrassing moments in my life. Thinking about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt that had never before been ridden reminds me of the time Mary Sue and I went horseback riding in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado after attending a meeting of the EPC General Assembly. Maybe I will tell you about it some other time. What I will tell you now is that it was definitely one of the most unforgettable *and* embarrassing moments of my life. Front and center today, though, is not something that happened to me, embarrassing or otherwise, but the pivotal, decisive moments in the life of Jesus that led to my salvation and, I pray, yours.

Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem just a few days before Passover was not by accident. It was carefully planned out. Way back in Luke 9, in the midst of His travels in Galilee, Jesus begins to prepare His disciples for His suffering and death. He tells them: “The Son of Man” – which is how Jesus often referred to Himself – “must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised to life” (9:22). About a week later, He tells them again (9:44). But, says Luke, “They didn’t get what He was saying. It was like He was speaking a foreign language and they couldn’t (figure it out). But they were embarrassed to ask Him what He meant” (9:45, *MSG*).

Then comes a decisive turning point in Luke 9:51, where Luke says: “As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven” – which would happen only after His betrayal, suffering, death, and resurrection – “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” Literally, Luke says, “He set His face to go to Jerusalem.” He “stepped Himself” for the journey to Jerusalem, knowing what would happen to Him once He got there. From that point on, Luke chronicles the travels of Jesus and His followers as they make their way to Jerusalem.

PALM SUNDAY

As I'm sure you know, Palm Sunday takes its name from the palm branches the crowd waved and spread on the parade route as Jesus passed by on His way into the city. Luke doesn't mention the palm branches, only the coats or other items of clothing people put on the road as an expression of honor and praise to Jesus. Of the other Gospel writers, both Matthew and Mark mention branches, but only John specifies that they were branches from palm trees. I'm not sure why Luke doesn't mention the palm branches, but the different details in the Gospel accounts help us to gain a fuller picture and a deeper understanding of what took place that day.

The other surprising thing that is not in Luke's account is the crowd's exclamation of "Hosanna!" – which does occur in the other three Gospel accounts. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the crowd's "Hosannas," but Luke does not. Like the other Gospel writers, Luke includes the crowd's excited expression of Jesus' honored status as He approaches the city: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" Or, in Luke's case, in emphasizing Jesus' identity as the true King of Israel: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (19:38). Luke may have chosen not to include the word "Hosanna" because he wrote his Gospel with the specific aim of introducing Gentiles (non-Jews) to the person and work of Jesus.

"Hosanna" would have been a foreign term to most of Luke's readers, if they were unfamiliar with the Scriptures and culture of the Jewish people. The word "Hosanna" comes from Psalm 118:25, where the psalm writer cries out: "Hosanna!" It means "save" – as in "Save us, O LORD!" Over the years, it morphed into a more general expression of praise to God. When you apply it to Jesus, both meanings are appropriate: We look to Him and cry out to Him as our Savior – in fact, our only hope of salvation; and we praise Him not only for who He is – the Son of God and Savior of sinners, God in flesh and blood, the promised Messiah, and the true King of our lives – but for what He has done (that only He could do) for us and for our salvation.

Even without the word "Hosanna," there is no doubt in the Gospel of Luke about who Jesus is or His "worth-ship" to be praised.

A TEMPORARY TRIUMPH

The whole of Jesus' earthly life and ministry comes to a climax in the events of Holy Week, starting with His coming to Jerusalem and His dramatic entrance into the city on Palm Sunday. It was a moment of triumph for Jesus. But it was a temporary triumph. It was a day of tremendous applause. But the applause was temporary. The tide would turn against Jesus almost immediately.

Even as He arrived in Jerusalem to the applause and accolades of the gathering crowds who had heard of the amazing, miraculous things Jesus had done – including the raising of His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11) – His opponents (mainly the established religious leaders in Jerusalem) were plotting against Him. In fact, in the aftermath of His raising of

Lazarus, they had issued a warrant for Jesus' arrest. John 11:57 says that they had put out the word that if anyone knew Jesus' whereabouts, they were to let the authorities know, so they could arrest Him.

In addition, as Luke says in verse 39, the Pharisees in the crowd on Palm Sunday were not happy at all about what people were saying about Jesus and the way they were praising Him. They wanted Jesus to tell His followers to "simmer down." They wanted Him to chastise His disciples. Instead, Jesus rebuked *the Pharisees* for wanting Him to rebuke *His followers*. He said: "If they (my disciples) kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise" (19:40, *MSG*).

"There is a time for everything," as it says in Ecclesiastes 3, "and a season for every activity under heaven" (3:1). "There is an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth" (*MSG*). What is absolutely certain, as Jesus makes clear, is that this occasion – the triumphant entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem as the promised Messiah-King – was *not* the time for His followers to be quiet. Now was the time to sing, to celebrate, to announce the true identity of Jesus and His coming not as an earthly ruler to sit on a throne in Jerusalem but to take His place as King in the heart of every person who will embrace Him as Savior and Lord and follow Him through life.

It is *always* the right time, in whatever way is appropriate to the setting, to give praise and honor to the Lord, and to bear witness to His saving love and gracious, kingly rule. *Always*.

FULFILLING PROPHECY

When Jesus came to Jerusalem for the last time, His entrance into the city was carefully premeditated (R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 673). Jesus planned His own parade. He orchestrated it Himself. This is the only time, the only occasion in the Gospels in which Jesus permitted a public demonstration or rally on His behalf (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Courageous: Luke 14-24*, 79). On numerous occasions in the Gospels, we find Jesus telling His followers and those who experience His healing touch not to speak openly about Him. But here – now – as He arrives in Jerusalem at the beginning of the final, climactic week of His sojourn on earth, He makes this dramatic, public pronouncement of His identity and welcomes the "Hosannas" He receives as He rides on a donkey into the city. He does it in order to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah who, more than 500 years earlier, in the next-to-last book of the Old Testament, had written these words:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your King comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
(Zechariah 9:9)

Philip Ryken points out that "The people of Israel had always understood Zechariah's prophecy to refer to the Messiah, to God's anointed King. When Jesus mounted (this) donkey

– not just any donkey, but specifically a pure-bred colt, as Zechariah promised – He was presenting Himself as Israel’s promised King” (Ryken, ‘the Coming of the King,’ www.preachingtoday.com).

By His actions, Jesus was sending a clear message. He was saying: “I am the true King whom the Lord your God promised to send.” You can bet that not everyone in the Palm Sunday crowd understood the message correctly. Many of them, no doubt, thought – and hoped – that Jesus would now move swiftly to get rid of the Roman occupiers and establish once and for all the glorious, everlasting political kingdom of Israel. That, as we know, was not Jesus’ intent. That is not why Jesus came. His was and is a different kind of kingdom, not a kingdom marked by military force or political power, but a kingdom of peace and love, of trust in God and loving obedience to Him.

THE KINGDOM OF JESUS

Think about this kingdom with me for a moment. The kingdom to which Jesus calls and invites us is not a government ruled by Democrats or Republicans, by conservatives or progressives or moderates. It is not defined by which political party is in power. It is not defined by the worldview of the most influential movers and shakers in the culture. The kingdom of God is defined by the rule of God and the expression of the heart of God in the lives of ordinary people all around the world. The kingdom of God consists of the people of God, which is what God has designed the church – His “called-out” people – to be. To paraphrase the late Eugene Peterson, the church is meant to be a “colony of heaven” in the midst of a broken, hurting world in rebellion against God. It is “a core element” – *a God-ordained element* – “in the strategy of the Holy Spirit for providing human witness and physical presence to the Jesus-inaugurated kingdom of God in this world. It is not that kingdom complete, but it is that kingdom” (Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, 110).

It’s true, there is more to the kingdom of God than the church. There is more to God’s kingdom than the institution of the church, with its various offices and structures of leadership, with its core values and vision and strategies and ministries. There is much more to God’s kingdom than the institutional church. But the kingdom of God is not less than the church. The kingdom of God is not about an institution. It is about the rule of God in the human heart. But God has ordained that we should join Him in His church as an outpost of heaven, demonstrating here on earth in our lives and relationships, in our witness and service, what life is like in the kingdom of God – of which Jesus Himself is the King.

What happened on Palm Sunday – what we must never forget or overlook in the story we tell about Jesus coming to Jerusalem – was Jesus’ public declaration of His Kingship. Jesus was not declaring His candidacy for some political office or title when He rode into the city on a donkey. He was letting Jerusalem and all its inhabitants know that He was (is) the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy, the true King who comes in peace and mercy to all who will receive Him.

Listen to what the crowd of disciples shouted as Jesus approached the city:

“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”
(Luke 19:38)

The first part of their praise comes from Psalm 118:26, right after the occurrence of the word “Hosanna” in verse 25. Does the second part sound familiar to you? It should. It is almost identical to the song of the angels who announced the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:14. They sang:

“Glory to God in the highest,
and peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests.”

Glory and peace. Peace and glory. The common denominator in these exclamations of praise is ... Jesus. It is all about Him. The glory of God is revealed in Him. True peace is found in Him. You may find momentary peace in other things, but you will not have true and lasting peace in your life until you have the peace with God that comes only through Jesus. As the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:14, Jesus Himself is our peace.

You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker or poster that says:

NO JESUS NO PEACE
KNOW JESUS KNOW PEACE

Maybe it sounds trite to you. Maybe you don’t go in for this kind of play on words. The thing is, it’s true. Jesus is the way to true and lasting peace in your life. Jesus is the *only way* to peace with God and the peace of God in your heart.

Jesus *is* the King of peace. Jesus came to bring us peace. Jesus went to Jerusalem on the final leg of His mission to give us peace with God. Jesus went to the cross for that same purpose. And He is ready to give His peace to everyone who desires it, to everyone who seeks *Him*, to everyone who will receive it through repentance of sin and faith in Him. He is ready to give it to *you*, if you ask Him. If you will trust Him. There will never be a better time than right now.

THE LAMENT OF JESUS

There is one more thing we must see in Luke’s telling of the story of Jesus’ coming to Jerusalem. Of all the Gospel writers, only Luke includes the tearful, sorrowful lament of Jesus as He looks toward the city. There is only one other place in the Gospels where we are told that Jesus wept. That is John 11:35, at the tomb of His friend Lazarus, just before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and restored him to life. Here Jesus weeps because He knows what awaits Jerusalem in the not-too-distant future. Like the prophet Jeremiah, who wept bitterly over the destruction of Jerusalem and the conquest of the kingdom of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 BC, Jesus weeps over the doom and destruction Jerusalem will experience in AD 70, when the Roman army, under the leadership of Titus, son of the Emperor Vespasian, puts down a Jewish rebellion, destroys the city, slaughters its inhabitants, and burns the Temple to the ground. In all, the Romans would kill 600,000 Jews during the onslaught by Titus – a kind of holocaust before the Holocaust.

Jesus knew it would happen. He could see it. He wept over Jerusalem because He knew that judgment would inevitably come. Jerusalem and its people had missed the moment of God's coming to them – the moment of *His* coming to them. They had turned down the divinely-orchestrated opportunity to be reconciled to God and to enjoy His blessing. Do you remember how Jonah, in the Old Testament, looked on the city of Nineveh and hoped that God would destroy it? Jonah was ticked off that God would show mercy to the city. Jesus, on the other hand, looked at Jerusalem and wept because of its sure and certain destruction.

Why was Jerusalem's judgment so sure and certain? Because, Jesus says, the people "did not recognize the time of God's coming" to them (19:44). There are two Greek words for time in the New Testament. One is *chronos*, which simply refers to the chronological passing of time, in terms of hours, days, weeks, and years. The other word – the one Jesus uses here -- is *kairos*. *Kairos* has to do with moments of great significance or opportunity. *Kairos* has to do with decisive moments that, if neglected or rejected or squandered, will never come again. The *kairos* for the leaders and people of Jerusalem, as for all the people of Judea and Samaria and Galilee, had to do with the coming, with the appearance, with the teaching and healing and God-in-flesh-and-blood life of Jesus, and His identity as the Messiah sent from God, the actual Son of God and Savior of sinners. The religious leaders of Jerusalem and their followers had every opportunity to embrace the message of Jesus and become His followers. But they refused. Now the die was cast. It was only a matter of time until Jerusalem would feel the full weight of God's judgment.

The thought of it made Jesus incredibly sad. I think there must be much that makes the heart of Jesus sad as He looks over our world today. When Jesus looks at our country, I can't help but think it makes Him sad that we as a nation have squandered so many blessings, both material and spiritual. When Jesus looks at the ways we and our leaders have turned away from God's ways, when He sees how our culture has abandoned God's Word and God's ways and set up our own gods of personal autonomy, I think it must break His heart. I think it must make Jesus sad – immensely sad – to see how far we have drifted as a nation from beliefs and values and practices that acknowledge God's supremacy and our dependence on Him. I wonder if, or when, it will be too late for us to turn to Him.

Surely Jesus laments over every act of racism of any kind. And over attempts to find racism or racist intent where it does not exist. Surely Jesus laments over the violence and mass shootings that plague so many communities. These kinds of things must break Jesus' heart.

It must break His heart when we promote evil and call it good, or reject what is good and call it evil.

I think Jesus must also lament over the condition of His church, when we fail to live according to the gospel, when we hold grudges against one another, when we insist on our own way, when we fail to be generous to those in need, when our self-righteousness is exposed and on display, when we are long on judgment but short on grace.

Above all, I think Jesus laments over those who spurn the message of the gospel or who keep putting off the decision to get serious about following Him in faith. If you keep pushing Jesus

away, the day will eventually come when it is too late, because you did not recognize the time -- the *kairos* -- of the Lord's coming to you.

It is not a comforting thought. But it is a warning – a warning wrapped in love – to respond to the invitation of Jesus to follow Him now, while you have the opportunity. Allow Him to form His life and character in you. I pray that you will do so today. Or that you will do so again – that you will renew your devotion and dedication on this Palm Sunday to love and trust and follow and serve the Lord Jesus all the days of your life. Make that devotion of your heart part of the story of your life.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.