

Matthew 21:1-11
Palm Sunday
April 2, 2023

We have watched lots of basketball games in the past months. There were grade school games coached by a son and a daughter. Many were high school games, following Lakeside Lutheran High School boys' and girls' teams. Most recently there were tournaments at the state and collegiate levels. Many have player introductions by announcers that mimic each other with lots of hype: exaggerated, lengthened pronouncement of names. One reserve greets the starting line up with fist bumps, special hand movements or leaping body bumps. For the big games the arena flashes multi-colored lights, all accompanied by the cheers of supporting fans. And then the action of the awaited game begins.

The time was centuries earlier. The high tech equipment hadn't been invented yet, but Palm Sunday brought a dramatic prelude to the key actions of Holy Week. Today we review that event and

WELCOME YOUR SAVIOR-KING

The special nature of the day stands out as we (I.) View the preparations. It was not long since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the grave. After that event the excitement had really built. The Savior had performed many miracles, but raising someone who had been in the grave for four days was the climax. Even more recently had been the anointing of Jesus with the expensive perfume that Mary had done. Her act pointed to and prepared for his death, as he had noted.

This Sunday morning Jesus and the disciples left Bethany, the town of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, located on the east side of the Mount of Olives. The village of Bethphage was nearby. It was a small place.

To that small town Jesus directed the attention of a pair of his disciples. "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." He described the scene exactly as they would find it. He also prepared them for possible objection to their actions. "If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." I can well imagine there would be such a question, but how would that simple statement satisfy and produce compliance? Perhaps the owners knew Jesus. It certainly demonstrated the authority of his Word. Of course, in reality all things belong to the Lord so he had every right to make the request. The pair of disciples didn't know the intended use of the animals—Jesus commonly walked. But they could carry out the assignment with confidence that he knew what he was doing and would take care of the situation. From accounts in other Gospels, we know it happened exactly as he had described.

Observing these preparations reminds us that Jesus knows all things. He is the omniscient Lord. Also, he let nothing happen by chance. He was in charge of the future course, knowing fully what lay before him. He had everything under control. We can then reason from the greater to the lesser. He will take care of the details in life for us, even little things. With that perfect knowledge he foresees the future and directs it in accord with his will. We are secure as we follow him. Trust him.

II.

Jesus was not the only source of advance description of the day's events. As he regularly wrote in his Gospel, Matthew directs us to (II.) Recognize the prophecy. He pointed to the fulfillment of the words of Zechariah, today's First Lesson. That prophet had worked among God's people about 5½ centuries earlier. He shared a message about the Lord's long range plans in order to encourage Old Testament Judah to rebuild the temple after they returned from the seventy years of captivity in Babylon. Matthew here cited the substance of the message, not the full quote. "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

He addressed Zion. That's another name for Jerusalem, the capital, and stood for the people of the city, or even the whole Jewish nation. Your king is coming, the prophet said. It would be their own leader, not a domineering foreigner. That was welcome news for a subject people. The king was coming to them. Usually it happened the other way around. Subjects had to approach their monarch. Not the case with Jesus. He comes to us. He gives to us, instead of demanding tribute. This king is different! He comes to you, for your benefit.

His manner was also special. He is gentle. The term means "not resisting." He seeks to win hearts with the truth, not with the club of force. So the use of a donkey, a common beast of burden, was fitting. Royalty more often rode horses. Jesus' mode of transportation showed his humility and his servant nature. It fit the work for which he was coming as well as his way of dealing with people as he is compassionate and approachable, not a scary dictator.

This reference to prophecy affirms the validity of our Savior and his work. Jesus is the one who was promised and predicted in the Old Testament. He is God's appointed Savior of the world. Not only was his coming and work foretold, but he did it. He fulfilled all of the more than 300 prophecies to a "T". He is for real. He is not an imposter or pretender to the position. He is the promised, sent and successful Savior.

God keeps his promises, all of them. Our faith is based on the sure Word of God. We can believe everything it says. If even the details of Christ's entry to Jerusalem were true, then it is also true when the Bible announces God's love, forgiveness and eternal peace. Recognize and believe the prophecies. Welcome your Savior-King.

The prophecy was a call to Zion to wake up and see their King. It calls to us also to shake off indifference and apathy, to acknowledge and follow the one whom God sent, to trust him, for he is "bringing salvation" as the full statement of Zechariah announced in the First Lesson. Rescue from all troubles, release from the bondage of sin—these are your blessings in him.

III.

Thus convinced, let's share the joy and (III.) Join the parade. The Savior-King received honor. The two disciples who had brought the donkey and colt put their cloaks on the animals. They didn't yet know which one Jesus would ride. Many others were present, a large crowd. Actually there were two crowds. One group had been coming along with Jesus, people from Galilee on the way to the Passover. Another crowd came from the city to meet the rest. They had already been in Jerusalem but came back when word spread that Jesus was on the way.

The crowds sensed something special was in the air and they also took off their robes and placed them on the ground in the path of the donkeys. Remember, these people were coming to Jerusalem for the Passover. They were wearing their holiday finery, but offered them as a welcome mat. It was fitting honor for a king. Others cut branches from the trees, an act normally connected with the Feast of Tabernacles. These actions were spontaneous, not scripted. It didn't take a command or persuasive argument to produce such a response of honor.

What did it signify? They were expressing trust in this Savior-King. Listen to their words: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" They spoke words of a psalm used during the Passover and in royal processions, with some interpretive additions. A key word was "Hosanna!" It means, "Save now," or "Grant salvation." They honored Jesus as the "Son of David." Centuries earlier, the Lord had promised Israel's famous king that the Savior would be born in his family line. The nation waited for the Messiah and used that phrase as a name for him to express their faith in God's promise.

"Blessed," they shouted. He had been and still was being blessed. He was the one coming. He was promised, awaited and bringing blessings. He came "in the name of the Lord," as his messenger and by his authority.

Clearly their words acknowledged him as the Savior. Jesus accepted the acclaim. Humble as he was, he didn't say they were carried away with emotions and said too much. All that they said was true. That's exactly what he was, their Savior and their King.

Soon the whole city was stirred up, also those who had not witnessed the entry procession. They were curious about what was going on and who was causing all the excitement.

We're excited, too, for he is our Savior. The salvation he brings is not just help with a minor annoyance, a boost for a day or a donation of pocket change. He has solved our biggest problem, the same need the world had all those centuries ago. Sin plagues us. It corrupts even our good intentions. Crafty Satan tempts us to impurity of thought, to foul speech, to hurtful words and to dishonest actions. We want to go our own way and get upset when God's plans don't match our own. Jesus was the rescuer, coming as the sacrifice in full payment for our sins. That was no small amount since a single sin deserves an eternity of human suffering in hell. Jesus could make the payment for the world because he was not just a man but was true God. His death satisfied divine justice. We are forgiven. What reason we have to sing his praises!

A question that comes up is why doesn't everyone join the Palm Sunday crowd in honoring the Savior-King? He's not the kind of king some people are looking for. He was humble, we noted, not a conquering hero. A mighty general might seem more fitting. Some people would rather have someone to pat them on the back and say everything is OK, that they have done nothing wrong. That isn't how Jesus handles it. He has standards. He calls us to repentance for violating his laws. Our sinful pride doesn't like to hear that.

Another question we have, since we know how the rest of the week turned out, is why didn't everybody stay on the side of Jesus? Why did the shouts switch to "Crucify him! Crucify him!?" While we could speculate about differences in the groups of Sunday and Friday or talk about mob psychology and the role of the religious leaders, it is a fact that some people don't want to be openly linked with faith in Jesus, just as those who gave an incomplete answer about Jesus' identity. He was more than "the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Did you ever back off and try to hide your confession? Did you ever join others in sinning because you didn't want to take a stand as a Christian? For our times of faltering we need to repent. Thanks be to Jesus, he forgives our failures!

Look at your needs and the needs of the whole world. See how Jesus perfectly meets those needs as Redeemer of your soul and as King of your life, just as he was prophesied. Welcome the Savior-King, not just as a charismatic leader, great miracle worker or inspiring example, but as your Savior and King.