

The King Who Comes
John 12:12:36
Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

One of the best things about growing up in our house on Northwest Boulevard was that we lived on the parade route. The Fourth of July parade was a big deal in Upper Arlington, Ohio. It was not uncommon, during the last week of June, to see sections of the boulevard roped off and lawn chairs set out in order to reserve a prime viewing spot. Once the first neighbor broke the seal, Dad and I would be out staking our claim along the curbside. When the Fourth finally arrived, it felt like there were a thousand people gathered on our front lawn. Everyone was anticipating the sound of the siren for the 10 a.m. start. On the Fourth of July, Northwest Boulevard was the place to be.

Around 33 A.D., on the Sunday before Passover, somewhere along the road between the village of Bethany and the city of Jerusalem, a parade route began to form. A massive festival crowd gathered in anticipation when they learned that Jesus was on his way. Over the years of church history, this event has become known as *Palm Sunday*. Those who had lined this impromptu parade route waved palm branches in celebration of Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem. On the Christian calendar, Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week leading up to Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

All four Gospels writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—describe this scene, each with their own point of emphasis. This morning, we're going to look at John's account. I would encourage you to grab a Bible and turn with me if you haven't already to John chapter 12. We're picking up the story in verse 12 where John notes that these events take place on "the next day" and that a great crowd was gathered "for the festival."

If we were reading through John's Gospel in sequence, we would see from the end of chapter 11 that this large crowd had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Passover. John's reference to the "next day" in verse 12 follows the events of verse 1 which took place "six days before the Passover." So, based on the Jewish calendar, this pre-Passover parade took place on a Sunday.

Up to this point, there had been much speculation among the general public as to who this Jesus of Nazareth was. His fame had grown throughout the region and many people even wondered if he might be the long-awaited Christ, the promised Messiah. For example, when a Samaritan woman told her neighbors about her encounter with Jesus, she said,

"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4:29, NIV).

Or listen to how John describes the divided responses to Jesus' teaching in the temple during the Festival of Tabernacles:

“At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, “Isn't this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.” ...Still, many in the crowd believed in him. They said, “When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?” (John 7:25-27, 31, NIV).

Later that winter, during the Festival of Dedication, Jesus was again teaching in the temple courts. John reports that

“The Jews who were there gathered around [Jesus], saying, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24, NIV).

But what did it mean to call Jesus the *Messiah* or in Greek, the *Christ*? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term from which we get our word *Messiah* literally means “anointed one.” A priest or a king whom God had set apart for his purposes was said to be God's anointed servant. And yet, over time, God revealed through his prophets that one day *the* Messiah would come, *the* Anointed One. This Anointed One to come would not be just another one of Israel's kings, he would be *the* King, *the* royal Messiah. So, for example, we read back in John 1 that

“Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John [the Baptist] had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ)” (John 1:40-41, NIV).

Those who believed that Jesus *was* the Messiah believed that he was this promised King who comes in the name of the Lord. This royal Messiah deserved to be the Grand Marshal of this Palm Sunday parade into Jerusalem. John tells us in verse 13 that the great crowd then

“took palm branches and went out to meet [Jesus], shouting, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the king of Israel!” (John 12:13, NIV)

Technically there were two crowds who had gathered on that Sunday to welcome King Jesus. One crowd may have traveled with Jesus from Bethany where he had recently raised a man named Lazarus from the dead. John notes in verse 17 that the Bethany crowd “continued to spread the word” about Jesus'

miraculous sign. The other crowd, who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover had heard the stories about Jesus and of Lazarus' resurrection. Many of these pilgrims were likely from Galilee and were well versed in the amazing things that Jesus had said and done. But both crowds were not only expecting to meet Jesus the miracle worker, they were expecting Messiah the liberator. That's why they waved palm branches. For first-century Jews, the palm branch was a symbol of nationalist hope. They waved these branches and shouted "Hosanna!" to "the King who comes" in hopes that the royal Messiah had finally come to free them from their oppressors.

This wasn't the first time that crowds like these had tried to make Jesus Messiah their warrior king. After Jesus had miraculously fed a crowd of thousands by multiplying a little boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish, John notes back in chapter 6 that

"After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." (John 6:14-15, NIV)

So let's ask the question as we begin this Holy Week: Who is this Jesus? Is he the Messiah, the Christ? Is he the King who comes in the name of the Lord? And if he's the King who comes, then what kind of king is he?

Picture with me the scene in Jerusalem with palm branches in the air along with shouts of Hosanna. Here he comes! It's Jesus! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Here comes the king riding triumphantly on the back of his warhorse. No, wait. Here he comes, but he's riding on...a donkey? A donkey? What kind of king parades into town on the back of a donkey?

In preparation for this week as we approach Good Friday and then Easter Sunday one week from today, I want to draw our attention to three truths in this passage about Jesus Christ, the King who comes.

First, **Jesus is the King who comes in peace.** Jesus didn't ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey in order to spoil the party. John tells us in verses 14 and 15 that Jesus knowingly was fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy. John references the prophet Zechariah who said,

"Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt" (John 12:15, NIV; cf. Zech. 9:9)

It's as if Jesus were saying to the expectant crowd, "Yes, I am your Messiah. I am your king. I'm not the king you want, but I am the king you need."

Jesus is the King who comes in peace. His kingdom would not be one characterized by political power or military might. King Jesus rides in triumph but on the back of a donkey, a beast of burden, a symbol of humility. He is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and Everlasting Father, but he is also the Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6). He is the King who came not “to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus Messiah is the king

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8, NIV).

Even though it was prophesied, the Palm Sunday parade-goers could not have fully understood what Jesus was doing on the back of that donkey. How interesting that even John, one of Jesus’ own disciples admitted in verse 16 that

“At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him” (John 12:16, NIV).

The significance of Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and for that matter all of his earthly ministry would not fully make sense until the Passover weekend was over. Only on this side of the cross and Easter’s empty tomb can we fully understand that **Jesus is the king who comes to die.**

One of the realities of this current COVID-19 crisis that we’ve all had to come to grips with, is that a lot can change in a short amount of time. No one along that Palm Sunday parade route knew that by the end of that same week, the one who they had hoped would become Israel’s conquering king would instead be mocked with a crown of thorns and nailed to a criminal’s cross.

But Jesus knew that this journey into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey would be his last. Listen to what Jesus said to the crowd in verses 23 and 24:

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” (John 12:23-24, NIV).

Does it sound strange that Jesus would speak about his sacrificial death on a cross in terms of *glory*? Certainly we would describe the Easter news of Jesus’ resurrection as glorious. Jesus’ glory would be evident when he ascended into

heaven many days later. And we often speak of Jesus' coming again at the end of the age as his *glorious* return. But in what sense is Jesus glorified in death?

In the middle his address to the crowd, Jesus then began to pray:

“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:27–28a, NIV).

And then something incredible happened. Most people thought they heard thunder, but in fact God the Father was audibly answering His Son's prayer.

“I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:28b, NIV).

God's glory had been on display throughout the ministry of Jesus Christ his Son. The Father was glorified in every word His Son preached and in every mighty work His Son performed. And now, in this final great act of obedience, the Son would once again glorify his Father.

The writer of Hebrews says that

“For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2b, NIV).

It wasn't that Jesus *enjoyed* the cross. No, in that moment Jesus admits that his soul is deeply troubled. There is nothing pleasurable about murder by crucifixion. There is no enjoyment that comes from bearing the curse of sin. The joy that was set before him was the Father-glorifying act of obedience that culminated at the cross. Jesus is the king who comes to die.

None of us can or will ever die for the sins of the world, but anyone who wants to follow Jesus must follow him to the cross. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said,

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”¹

Bonhoeffer knew this to be true both from his study of Scripture and from his own experience. On April 5, 1943, exactly 77 years ago today, Bonhoeffer along with his sister and her husband, were arrested by the Nazis and taken to a military prison in Tegel, Germany near Berlin. Later he was transferred to the Flossenburg concentration camp where on April 9, 1945 he was executed. Two weeks later the allied forces liberated the camp at Flossenburg.

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 89.

Jesus said to his disciples and to all who were gathered there on that first Palm Sunday,

“Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” (John 12:25-26, NIV).

I don't know how or when Jesus will bid you to come and die. Some of us may quite literally die for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ. But all of us who wish to follow Jesus as his disciple will have to die to self. We do this by coming in faith out of sin and out of darkness into repentance and into the light of Christ.

The final truth we need to observe from this passage is that **Jesus is the King who comes as the light**. Once Jesus had finished speaking about his coming death, the palm-waving crowd did some quick mental math. And the answer they came up with did not compute.

In verse 34, the crowd said to Jesus,

“We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?”

The crowd is saying, “Jesus, we know from the Scriptures that the Messiah will live forever. But how then can you, this so-called “Son of Man” be the Messiah if you say that you will be lifted up in death?”

Now notice Jesus' response in verses 35-36:

“Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light” (John 12:35-36, NIV).

Two things have happened recently to confirm the rumor that spring is indeed on its way. The snow is melting and the days are getting longer. I can't promise that we've seen the end of snow for a while, but I do know that for a season the sun will shine for a few more minutes each day. But even on the longest day of the year, at the end of the day darkness will come. The light is with us just a little while.

For the Palm Sunday crowd, this meant that Jesus' earthly ministry was soon going to draw to a close. There would be no more sermons on the mount, meals from heaven, or teaching in the temple. On Good Friday, the light would go out,

at least until Sunday. For us today, we need to hear that we too have the light, but only for a little while.

Perhaps over these last few weeks of quarantine and social distancing you've felt an abundance of time. Our family calendar is as empty as I can remember it in years. But a day is still twenty-four hours, and a lifetime is at best 80, 90, or 100 years. In the light of eternity that's not very long. And in the last few weeks, thousands of people all around the world, both young and old, people who thought they had their whole life ahead of them died and entered into eternity forever in the presence of Christ, or into eternal darkness. Right now you have the light, but only for a little while.

Listen to Jesus say to you:

“Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. ...Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.”

As we begin this Holy Week and consider once again Jesus the King who comes in peace, Jesus the King who comes to die, and Jesus the King who comes as the light, let me close with one more passage from John's Gospel.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God” (John 3:16-21, NIV).