

## ***Waving Palms of Victory***

Trinity CRC, April 2, 2023 AM  
Palm Sunday

**Matthew 21:1-11 (v.9)**

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**Matthew 21** As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “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. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

<sup>5</sup> “Say to Daughter Zion,  
‘See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. <sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

<sup>10</sup> When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

<sup>11</sup> The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Dear Children of the King,

Back in the gold rush days of the 1800s in San Francisco, a confused man named Joshua A. Norton declared himself to be emperor of the US. According to the account I read, Norton “was a colorful character, to say the least. When speculation in the rice market brought him to financial ruin, something happened to Norton’s mind. He declared himself ‘Emperor of These United States.’ It might have been a practical joke, or it might have been the result of a clouded mind. Whatever the initial reason, Norton’s pretending soon grew into a delusion. In 1859 he published a proclamation that he was emperor according to an act of the California legislature. He found a sword, stuck a plume in his hat, found a cape, and marched the streets in colorful costume.

“The citizens of San Francisco were amused by this ploy and so played the game with him. They gave him recognition with free tickets to special events. He was invited to gala opening nights. In fact, they allowed him to collect a small tax and issue his own currency. It was all done in the spirit of fun. But to Norton it was serious business. In fact, he expanded his authority to ‘Emperor of These United States and Protector of Mexico.’

“When he died in 1880, more than ten thousand curious people attended Norton’s funeral service – one of the largest funerals ever to take place in California. He lived and died in his own delusion of grandeur. He didn’t hurt anyone; in fact, he brought a bit of a smile and a chuckle to people who came across his path.

“But make no mistake about it. Joshua A. Norton was never really the emperor. Had he really insisted on a confrontation with the United States government, he would have been disposed of rather quickly. More than likely, he would have been confined to an insane asylum for the rest of his life.” (*April 4, 2004, Rev Kenneth E. Kovacs, Catonsville Presbyterian Church, Catonsville, Maryland*)

## **What Kind of King?**

What about Jesus? Was Jesus a king? If so, what kind?

Some of the people in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday believed that Jesus was just as crazy as Norton. Meanwhile those same people deluded themselves into thinking that they were the centre of the universe in some sense. Only after dying, would they discover that the Bible’s title for Jesus is accurate. He is King of kings, Lord of lords, and no pretend emperor will ever take his place. In this life, though, most of them hated Jesus.

In fact, after Jesus rides into town amid shouts of “hosanna,” the religious authorities are upset. We read,

*Mt 21:15 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant.*

In other words, they didn’t have any use for Jesus of Nazareth. To them he is crazier as Joshua Norton. He not only thinks he’s an emperor. He claims to be God. So, they are prepared not just to lock him in a padded room but to nail him to a rugged cross. To them, he’s no king.

On the other hand, Matthew reports that Jesus comes into town on the colt he told the disciples to get for him. As he comes, we read,

*Mt 21:8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"*

To this crowd, Jesus is a king. He is the Son of David, meaning a king like David, who would restore Israel to a place of honour in the world. He's the Messiah they've waiting for.

They'd been watching Jesus out in the countryside. In the other gospel's we read about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead shortly before coming to Jerusalem. Matthew also tells us that Jesus heals two blind men just before telling the disciples to get him the colt. Now those former blind men join the crowd of Jesus-supporters. They perhaps shout louder than anyone else! If this man can heal the blind and raise the dead, then he can certainly rebuild the kingdom of Israel.

This crowd welcomes Jesus to Jerusalem with practices reserved only for royalty. They spread their cloaks on the ground as was done for kings. They wave politically-charged palm branches in the air—a symbol of victory—believing Jesus will be their victor over their enemies, like Rome. So, they usher Jesus into town like a conquering king. They sing songs of praise to Jesus as he majestically enters the city. They fully expect that political and military change is just one more miracle away. (cf. Kovacs)

So we have people who consider Jesus a lunatic. Others who consider him the one who will be a king to defeat Rome. So, now stop a moment and think about it, congregation. Which side do you think you would be on? Do you prefer a Jesus who is should not be taken seriously? There are people like that today too. Even sitting in churches. We may not think about killing him, like the leaders in Jerusalem. But for all intents and purposes, we don't take him seriously as king of our life. We won't say that out loud. We won't even think it in so many words. But our actions show it to be the case.

Jesus cramps our style. If we have to listen to his voice and live life his way when we're at school, then we have to change how we treat students we don't like. At our jobs, we have to do our work differently, and change the things we talk about with our friends. And if we let him rule our lives at home, we'll probably have to change the channel on our TVs more often or even turn the box off. Following Jesus closely may mean staying away from certain websites on our computers and smartphones. We might have to change the way we deal with each other on a daily basis. And if let Jesus into our offices, we might have to check the numbers a little closer and close some of the loopholes we put in our contracts. And if he comes along to the dressing room with my hockey team, will I have to change my language (and I don't mean switching from English to French!)? Will I have to change my behaviour with the team and on the ice? Maybe you don't want Jesus dead, but do you want him right next to you all the time, ruling your life?

On the other side of the coin, perhaps you want a Jesus like the crowd coming into Jerusalem with him. You want a strong man in your life. He's like a big brother or a big friend who can take care of all the people who aggravate you. Wouldn't that be nice? That's essentially what the crowd wanted when they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Give me a Jesus who takes care of my

earthly problems and makes our nation sovereign again, instead of being ruled by those terrible Romans.

Some today talk this way: If I believe in Jesus, I want him to heal my diseases. I want him to take care of my financial worries. I want him to help me win my games, get better grades in school, make my children successful, and give me a better job. I want him to remove people from my life that aggravate me. I want him to give me a life without struggles. Those kinds of requests are not a lot different than what the cheering Palm Sunday crowd wants from Jesus. They see him only as a great man—even a man from God, a prophet and a king no less—but only for earthly comfort.

So what is missing from these attitudes?

Before I answer that, let me ask you this? Did you hear about the hobby farmer who decided not to grow corn one year and instead to try his hand at chicken farming? He went to the feed store and ordered 100 baby chicks. A week passed and he came back and ordered another hundred. The feed store clerk asked him, “What are you going to do with another hundred chicks? What happened?” Well, the farmer said, “The first bunch all died! I can’t figure it out. I’m either planting them too deep or watering them too much!”

There’s a parallel between that and our life. Too often we try to figure out the spiritual world according to the categories of this world the way that farmer thought he could plant chicks just like corn seed. But it doesn’t work. We’re part of a spiritual world that operates within the physical realm. The Apostle Paul states clearly what that means for us when he writes,

*Eph 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

I’ve been a pastor long enough to see how badly people can mess up their lives when they disregard the spiritual forces of life. The first century Jews see Rome as the main enemy and Jesus as a potential Messiah from the problem of Rome. They shout, “Hosanna, Lord save! Jesus, beat back the Romans and our problems will be gone.” But they don’t see Jesus as their Saviour from sin. No, just someone to set their world the way they want it to be.

I see Christians today do that same thing. A man I served with in one church was chairman of council and had an affair on his wife. He said, “I’m not happy with my wife and God wants me to be happy. My secretary makes me happy. So this is what God wants for me.” In effect, he said, “Hosanna to Jesus! He saved me from a bad marriage partner and gave me a woman who makes me happy.”

You see, like those Jews shouting hosanna, we can delude ourselves into thinking Jesus just wants us to be happy in this world. But the spiritual reality is that Jesus wants us to be at peace with God. That’s the king he is! That’s a lot better than just being happy through whatever this world sends our way.

Jesus offers us a whole different way of living. He's not just a bandaid to cover up our problems or a doctor to transplant one spouse with another. He's the Son of God to set us free from the tyranny of the devil. He's the Messiah who comes to transform our lives. That's what we need. He came to conquer sin for us and to lead us into a whole new way of living.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of Jesus' purpose in coming and his power over sin when he says,

*Heb 2:14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he [that is Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--<sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

And not just fear of death in the final sense of being dead here on earth. It's fear of all the forms of death that sin brings into our world. It's fear of those who might be stronger than us, whether Rome or the bully on the playground, or the fear of dealing with the issues that underlie our problems with others and issues at work. The good news is that Jesus can and will help us. And he can because he defeated Satan, sin and death on the cross and in his resurrection.

Through his spiritual victory, he has made us children of God. Hebrews tells us,

*Heb 2:17 For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. [In addition,]<sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. [that's us!]*

Dear friends, Jesus is all we need. He's the King we need. Life for the Christian is about understanding what Jesus is up to in our lives. He needs to be our Saviour from sin. That means we need to take our sin seriously when we find ourselves in difficult places and times, like the Jews did. Maybe we're in a difficult relationship, maybe we're unhappy in our work, even unhappy in our school or church.

But now ask yourself what role is my own sin playing in these problems? Am I too stubborn? Am I doing something wrong? Do I need to confess my sin to someone? You see, Jesus doesn't only want to forgive your sins. He wants to change your life from the inside out. That's the kind of king he is. Because that's the kind of king we need.

## **The King We Need**

If you truly want to find the peace and the joy of life that only God can give, then you've got to stop looking to Jesus to give you what you want and instead look to him to help you find what you need.

The Lord calls us to acknowledge the reality of sin and the presence of Satan in this world and in our lives. He reminds us that a spiritual battle rages. Satan is trying to break down our confidence in Christ. That's been Satan's game

from the start. He can't beat Christ but he tries to demoralize and destroy Jesus' followers. So, he gets us to focus on the wrong cause of our problems.

We look at the physical reality—we're not getting along—instead of the spiritual reality—that sin and Satan are trying to destroy God's good design for life. So instead of looking outside of ourselves for blame, we must see our own sin and weakness and then we need to turn to Jesus for help because Jesus is the victor over Satan and over the sin we face in our own hearts. We need to turn to Jesus and start listening to him and doing things his way. If he is our King, then we must follow and obey him. Trust him to lead us well.

It's not just the crowd shouting "Hosanna" that needs to see Jesus for who he really is. It's not just the indignant people in the city of Jerusalem who frown when Jesus disrupts their business in the temple and want him killed. It's you and me too. It's the whole world who needs to see that Jesus intentionally comes into town on donkey's colt because that animal is a symbol of peace. If he intended to be a human warrior and king as the crowd expected, he would have ridden a horse, the ride of a warrior. But the Prince of Peace came into town on a donkey because that's the kind of King we need.

Like that beast of burden, Jesus came to bear the burden of all of our sins. He came to make a better life possible for us. Not a life that offers riches in this world or even perfect physical health. He offers a life transformed by his power and grace. A life that's not about me. And not about you. A life that is lived for the glory of God in the confidence that Jesus is King of kings and the victor over all that sin and Satan can throw our way.

We live in a world where the King has come and yet millions are totally unaware that he is present. The Bible tells us about a day when Jesus will return and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ IS the one and only King. That's the picture we find in the last book of the Bible:

*Rev 7:9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches (a symbol of victory) in their hands.*

*<sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*"Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb." (that's Jesus!)*

I'm looking forward to joining that multitude one day. I hope you are too. Until then, let's live in the confidence that Jesus our King of kings is already victorious. Don't merely ask him for what you want. Bow before your King and ask him what he wants for you. Satan doesn't want us to find the fullest life possible that Jesus offers. He wants us to keep pursuing our own agendas. But let's live in the power of Jesus and seek his gracious help each day to live for the glory of God like Jesus did.