

“The King Arrives”

*Zechariah 9:9; Psalm 118:26; Luke 19:28–44;
John 12:12–15*

The true story

A thousand years before Jesus, God had promised King David that one from his line, his house, would sit on the throne of Israel. And now, on the Sunday before Passover, Jesus lays claim to that throne for all to see. He wraps himself in every messianic symbol -- the colt, the cloaks, escorted in through the Eastern Gate -- all of it. There was nothing hidden now. But there was more, for in riding into Jerusalem, YHWH had returned to Zion. For God’s people, there was to be no king but God.



Once a year we gather to celebrate Palm Sunday. Palms waving, children parading, choir in full voice. It is always a wonderful and often spectacular Sunday. But it is easy to miss what is going on when Jesus enters Jerusalem. For more than two years, he had been circumspect about his identity and mission. He avoided the big cities in Judea and Galilee. He told people to keep what he had done for them to themselves.

But now, all that is past. Jesus takes every symbol of messiahship, the arriving King of Israel, and wrapped them around himself. No chance for misunderstanding now. He had come to claim his throne. Yes, God’s Messiah had arrived. And could Jesus be even more?? Let’s begin by briefly painting the picture.

The crowds are gathered outside the city walls of Jerusalem, at the eastern gate. They are ready and they are pumped! The day has come. At long last, when it seemed that God would never hear their cries, God has sent his Messiah, his anointed one. This king, from the house of David, would inaugurate a true God-ruled kingdom and set about to put the world right. At long last, the Jews would be free of their hated Roman oppressors. At long last, the temple would be cleansed of all the money-grubbing, ambitious pagan influences. At long last God’s king was arriving, ready to be welcomed into the city as a king should be welcomed. Hosanna,¹ indeed!

As for Jesus, he purposely wraps all these messianic symbols around himself: the colt, the ride through the city gates, the palm branches, the cloaks laid out in front of him, the shouted Hosannas. All of it. And for the first time, Jesus refers to himself as “Lord”. The waiting is over; the time has come.

I bet you like a good party as much as I do. Who doesn’t? And that Sunday in Jerusalem was supposed to be the beginning of the biggest and best party ever. A celebration of salvation. A freedom party. The arrival of the most amazing gift of all – God’s rescue of Israel from the oppressors and the pagans.

You see, it was Passover Week. Every spring, Jews from all over converged on Jerusalem for this festival. It had been instituted by the LORD God Almighty more than a thousand years before. Ever since, God’s people had remembered and participated in the rescue of the Hebrews from Egypt as they gathered in homes on a spring evening each year.

This year promised to be the Passover to top all Passovers, for God was about to do his big thing. The time had come. The day had arrived for the keeping of all the promises God had made through his prophets. And it was to start with one man from Galilee.

It seemed almost impossible to believe, there had been so many disappointments. But the momentum had been building. Crowds had escorted Jesus through Jericho, not far from Jerusalem. There, Jesus had brought salvation even to a hated tax collector named Zacchaeus. It seemed that everyone, really everyone, was invited to participate in this party.

Jesus had arrived at Jerusalem and was preparing to wrap himself in all the messianic symbols available. No one was to misunderstand the meaning of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. . . . *but what did it really mean?*

The arrival

¹ “Hosanna” means “Save us!”

I love Meredith Wilson's Broadway musical, *The Music Man*. The musical is set in the Iowa town of River City around the turn of the twentieth century. In one scene, the whole town turns out to await the arrival of the Wells Fargo wagon, the weekly UPS truck of the day. No telling what treasures were on that wagon. What dreams would be fulfilled when the wagon stopped and unloaded its cargo?

The Jews of Jesus' day were waiting for a Wells Fargo wagon. And what would be on that wagon when it arrived? It would carry a Messiah, who would in all power and might and wonder and glory throw out the pagan oppressors and cleanse the temple, restoring it to a proper dwelling place of God. The wagon would carry all the nations of the world who would stream to Jerusalem to acknowledge and worship the LORD God. The wagon would carry all those who had died and would now be resurrected, re-embodied to new life. Sons would embrace their long-dead grandmothers and mothers would meet their children who had died during birth. There would be no more tears, except of joy. There would be no death and no mourning, no wars and violence, no hatred or arrogance, no privilege nor division. All would live in peace, enjoying a renewed and restored land, worshiping without end the one who had made them and who was now making all things new.

That was the wagon the crowds thought they were welcoming on that Sunday in Jerusalem. The work was over; the party was just about to get rolling.

Of course, five days later, all those expectations had been dashed against a rock called Golgotha. Most turned away, hoping to pick the right wagon another time. Even after the Sunday morning of the empty tomb, only a few believed that they had welcomed God's wagon after all.

But those few, Jesus' disciples, had met the risen Jesus. He had given them work to do. To be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. To make disciples. To baptize people into a newly born community that would not simply wait for God to finish his work, but to accomplish work of their own. They were to build for the kingdom of God. They were to live out the reality of their claim that, in Christ, they had been reborn. It was as if they were to found and then grow colonies of a new human race. For, indeed, God's future had arrived already, but not yet. God's kingdom was both present and coming.

The shape of these Spirit-of-Christ-empowered new colonies was clear. They were to pray together, to learn together, to worship together, to share the Lord's meal together. They were to feed and clothe, to ensure that not a single person among them was in need of the basics. As best they could, they were to enact heaven-on-earth in all that they did – this was how they were to do life together.

You and I may be living 2,000 years later, but the mission is unchanged. We are to be disciple-making witnesses to the living Lord. We too are to feed and clothe, to love our neighbor, recognizing that our neighbors include those we dislike or even hate or are even our sworn enemies. Jesus came for all and his kingdom is for all who will respond to his invitation.

In Christ, we experience the fullness of God's eternity – here and now. This is one way we "out live" our lives. But in another sense, we outlive our lives by living outwardly, embracing the world around us and all those who share it with us. Palm Sunday is not an ending at all, but always and ever, a vibrant new beginning.

So, really, who is Jesus?

This is the Palm Sunday question. It was certainly the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. And it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter.

The palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed one. In John's brief telling of Jesus' welcoming, the crowds shout "Hosanna," which means "save us" in Hebrew. They sing out "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel." This is from Psalm 118, a song of God's victory, the day when God has finally acted. But the crowds wrongly expect that Jesus is to be a warrior king, that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has come to a head.

John helps us to see that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John's quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – very messianic in other words. But John changes the opening words of the quotation from "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion" to "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion." Here, John draws on Zephaniah 3. The fuller quote

from Zephaniah 3:14-16 (I've underlined a key phrase) will make clearer what John is trying to accomplish with the change:

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the Lord God himself. Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn't really any sign that God had returned. The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God's promise: "See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on Monday, Jesus didn't head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and their temple. A couple of decades later, long before the writing of any of the Gospels, Paul would describe the body of Christ as God's temple, as well as each individual believer (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20).

Whom do we welcome?

When we sing our Hosannas and wave our palms, who is it that we welcome into our worshipping congregation? Do we, like the crowds in Jerusalem, see Jesus as no more than the fixer of all our problems? Do we worship Christ only if it works for us? If so, what do we do when our problems are not fixed to our liking. Some of the palm-waving crowd in Jerusalem would have still been alive forty years later to see the Romans burn the city and the people's temple to the ground. Sadly, some of us will have marriages that fail, relationships that crumble, and hopes that go unrealized.

Can we, instead, welcome Jesus as our Lord, our Master? Can we look ahead to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and see in them an invitation to love sacrificially? Can we come to the parade and see the rest of the story?