

A Real Savior, a Real King, and Real Glory

Palm Sunday—March 28, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

John 12:12-16

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

This year's Gospel reading of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem is from John, and there we find the briefest description of all the Gospels—even shorter than Mark who seems to always use the fewest words. When faced with such a scant telling of a significant event the temptation is to jump to the other Gospels and then gather all the information, we can to fill out our story. While there may be something to be gained by gathering all the information we can, there is something lost in this collecting of data. When reading an author, one should first be considering what message that author is trying to convey. John was brief for a reason. As it is the last of the Gospels to be written, John may have been brief since he knew the story of Palm Sunday was already known by most readers who had already heard the other accounts. But there is a special blessing to John's brevity. We love to hear the wordy and full tellings of events as we long to know all the details we can, but it is in the brief reports that we are reminded of the central meaning of an event. There is a lot going in the Palm Sunday event and it is easy for us to get lost in all that activity. In just a few verses John tells us the meaning of that fateful day. It was a day for Israel to greet their true Savior, the true King, and even greater yet, it was a time to see the full glory of God!

This was the day when the Holy City would greet and celebrate their long-awaited Savior. John writes, *The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!"* The crowds shouted *hosanna* which means "save us," or "save us now." It was both a shout of praise and a call for salvation, and there was plenty from which these people needed saved! They longed to be saved from the oppressive rule of the Romans who taxed them to the extreme and treated them with contempt. They desired better leadership from their own people, as they knew their religious leaders were hypocrites and not true servants of their God. It hardly needs explained that theirs was a provocative cry as the Romans only had room for one great savior and that was Caesar, and the Jewish leaders were not about to give up their authority to this backwoods rabbi. But for now, Jesus had appeared, and he was hailed as the great Savior.

While it may seem old and quaint to hear of crowds shouting "save us," we live in a very similar age when folks are calling out in all sorts of directions for saviors. In the face of life's many troubles we find ourselves looking for rescue from a host of different sources. We look to science, and in recent days the great boast is that "I believe in and follow the science," and the profound insult is to accuse someone of not doing likewise. We believe in medicine, and this is understandable as modern medicine has conquered a host of diseases and extended our lives in amazing ways. We believe in politics and trust that our worldly leaders should be able to successfully address all the major and minor troubles of our lives. We look for solutions in psychology, wealth and comfort. In more recent years many scientists have placed great hopes in being able to contact alien life from somewhere in our universe in hopes that there is a higher and wiser life form out there that can bring us wisdom and hope. Just last week I heard a reporter delighting in NASA's adding a full-time employee to manage the research into contacting alien life forms. We naturally sense the need for salvation, as we are broken and weak people in a world full of troubles, and so we reach out for help. Sadly, we look in the wrong places.

Today we rejoice in the real Savior who has come to save his people. Jesus came to reveal to us the full righteousness and love of God and he did so through both word and deed. Jesus also showed us all the deep and powerful wickedness of this dark and fallen world. Sin, the rebellion and alienation from God which threatens to destroy us, was conquered by Jesus' atoning death on the Cross, and by that death we were forgiven and reconciled to God! Christ has brought us a full salvation. It may not be what we first cried out for, and it was not what the crowds of Palm Sunday expected, but it is a true and full rescue.

At Jesus' Palm Sunday appearance in Jerusalem, Israel was able to see their true Savior, but they saw even more. They met their true King. John tells us, *So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!" Jesus found a young donkey and*

sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" Israel delighted that their King had come, and their song was from a prominent psalm. John adds the prophecy of Zechariah of the great King coming humbly on a donkey. It is said that a conquering warrior came on a horse, but a leader mounted on a donkey was one who came in peace. Jesus was the Prince of Peace. Other accounts tell of the crowds hailing Jesus as the son of David, which was the same as calling him King. Their hope was that Jesus would be the one to sit upon the eternal throne of David's dynasty which had been empty for some six hundred years.

Again, it sounds odd and archaic to say that we presently long for a great King, but we do! Our world longs for a ruler who will demonstrate a complete competence and ability to rule with justice, and will care completely for their people. In our day we look to the world of politics. One of the reasons that political conflicts in our day have been so heated is that we put so much hope in our political systems. For too many people this is their only hope. This is not a new false hope. For most of my young life I recall people lamenting that we need another John Kennedy to come along and to inspire and unify us as a nation. We can always use competent leaders, but they are not our ultimate answer, and this past year has taught us all the limited ability of human leadership. One of my favorite Bible passages is in Revelation chapter five. John was taken up into the courts of heaven where he saw a sealed scroll which symbolized the destiny of the world and of all people. The cry went out, *Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?* In other words, who was competent to command the destiny of this world? It was then that John wept, for he knew that no one was able to meet such a mighty task. The world seemed to be out of control and John wept that there seemed to be no one to lead us out of this mess. I have wept with John, and I know that you have too. But John did not weep for long, for there came an announcement of Good News. *Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.* Jesus stepped forth and took the scroll. Jesus is now our King and as King, Jesus commands our destiny. We are in good hands, and with John, we now rejoice.

The people cried out for a King, and for a moment they put their trust in Jesus of Nazareth, but soon that faith would appear to be misplaced. Things would soon go badly for Jesus, and the people would quickly lose faith in him. But through all the pains and horrors of the week, Jesus would conduct himself with an unbending royal dignity, and though he would die an agonizing and humiliating death, he would soon be raised in triumph. The Resurrection would soon prove that Jesus is the King, and though the King has ascended back to his home, he will return in glory to establish the Kingdom in its fullness.

The crowds in Jerusalem saw a Savior, and they saw their King, but in a few days, they were to see something much greater. They were about to see the full revealing of the glory of God! John writes, *His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when*

Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. The disciples, along with all the others gathered, would not understand the meaning of that day and that week's events until it was all over. John speaks of Jesus being glorified, and the moment of Jesus' glory is a strong theme in John's Gospel. Glory is a mysterious concept. It refers to the splendor and magnificence which is God. No one has seen God, but at times God has revealed his glory. We think of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night which guided Israel in the wilderness in Moses' day. We remember the great cloud of glory which descended upon Mount Sinai when God came down to speak to Moses, and the nation of Israel stood in fear for the greatness and power of it all. But the greatest revealing of God's glory came in the person of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who showed us, at ground level, the righteousness, power and love of God. To see Jesus is to see God and to see God's glory.

But John tells of a special time of Jesus revealing to us God's glory, and it is not what we would expect. In his miracles, wise teachings and love for others God's glory was shown, but this was not the great and ultimate moment of glory for Jesus. Our Lord frequently spoke of the moment when he would be glorified, and that moment was very soon to come. One would suspect that Jesus was referring to the glorious morning of Resurrection when he would appear to the women and then to the apostles. One might think of his being taken up into heaven some weeks later. These were truly moments of glory, but they are not the greatest moments of glory of which Jesus frequently spoke. Jesus' greatest glory was to be revealed in his betrayal, condemnation, torture and agonizing death, for through these events the full extent of God's immeasurable love would be revealed.

Palm Sunday begins a week which we could accurately call an awful week of glory. This has long been a day of great uneasiness for me. Jesus is hailed as Savior and King by crowds who would turn on him, and in a few days would be calling for his crucifixion. Jesus was to be crucified by the godless Romans and betrayed by the Jewish leaders. Worse yet, his closest associates would betray him, deny him and run and hide. It can be said that today we begin a miserable week full of tumult, confusion, tension, betrayal, desertion and human failing. Each year I watch this drama unfold and there wells up in a me a sense of sadness and shame. And Jesus called this his great moment of glory.

It is Palm Sunday, and the fullness of God's glory is about to be revealed. We can stand in amazement that God could use all the evils and frailties of humanity as a way of working out a great salvation. In anger and rebellion, the human race crucified Jesus, and God used that death as a means to bring forgiveness and life to those who perpetrated this unspeakable crime. But a far greater and ultimate glory can be seen in Jesus who patiently and graciously endured every moment of this agony for us. So great is the love of God toward his creatures. This is love beyond all measure. This is the glory of God fully revealed.

Palm Sunday begins Holy Week—a week which I find cringe-worthy and embarrassing, for it speaks so directly to my own rebellion and weakness. Ahead of us is a sad week, which we gladly remember leads to Easter morning glory and a Risen Savior. Yes, Jesus' glory was revealed in the Resurrection, but it is revealed all the more powerfully and fully in the ugly and heartbreaking days of his passion. These are the days when our Lord is truly glorified. Such amazing love! So glorious is our God!

Today we join the rejoicing crowds in waving palm branches, a sign of praise and victory. This may seem like a grand act of hypocrisy, for we praise the very Savior and King which we would so quickly betray. Today is a day which reminds us all that we are broken people, hypocrites and sinners. But whatever it might say about us, the palm branches stand as a testimony to our Victorious Lord who in spite of all that we may have done, has won the mightiest of victories and has fully revealed the glory of God.

