



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

A Great Truth to Believe and Rejoice In

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Matthew 21:1-11 (ESV)

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

"Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

I've enjoyed Palm Sunday worship services ever since I was a kid because they're festive. There's energy and excitement in the sanctuary. I love the parade-like processional and singing *All Glory, Laud, and Honor* and waving palm branches along with fellow worshippers. I love the children singing their Hosanna songs. It's a very special day of the church year. And so we pull out all the stops.

It's important for us, though, to ask why is this day so special? What's really going on in this story that we read each year, the week before Easter? Well, we see Jesus on the road going from Bethphage on the Mount of Olives to the city of Jerusalem. It's about a one-mile stretch. This road has many travelers on it on this particular day because it's the

beginning of the Passover festival when people from all over Israel make their annual pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple to observe the Passover, which is a time of remembering and celebrating how God freed their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and established them as his own people. This day, however, Jesus's journey is looking a little different from other days. Jesus always walked, you see. But now he's riding on a donkey – a donkey that he had commissioned his disciples to get for him.

It's rather odd. Why ride a donkey? He appears to be making some sort of public statement about himself in doing this. Like the prophets of old who did symbolic things to make a public statement to fellow Israelis. So no wonder when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem with such fanfare and people ask, "Who is this?" The answer from some is "This is the Prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." It was a prophetic move. Obviously, Jesus knows this ride would get people's attention and stir up some excitement.

Now some people in the crowd treat his approach to Jerusalem as a parade. They even line up along the roadway as Jesus rides by and begin welcoming him as a king. They excitedly greet him with these words: "Hosanna to the Son of David." David once was Israel's greatest king. People even throw their cloaks on the road before Jesus as an act of submission that they would be given to a king. After all, they reason this Jesus with his miraculous powers and declarations of the Kingdom of God being at hand, must be finally coming to Jerusalem to claim His crown. Earlier on in this ministry of our Lord's, a crowd even tried to make him their king after his feeding of the 5,000 people with a few loaves and fish. And Jesus refused them at that time. But look at him now. He's riding a donkey into the capital city of Jerusalem. Many in that crowd are viewing his arrival as his coming out – coming into his own to be king. He's making his claim of kingship. Many in the crowd remember that the Prophet Zechariah had long ago even predicted this day, saying, "Inhabitants of Jerusalem, behold your king comes to you humble and riding on a donkey." So as Jesus moves towards the city gates, there are many in the crowd who are thinking the time has come. Finally, our promised King has arrived. Let's celebrate and honor Jesus with a parade.

They were somewhat correct. Jesus is king, but not the kind of king they expected. And we'll see that later on in Holy Week. When the bloodthirsty crowd shouted for his crucifixion, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor asked Jesus, "What have you done wrong?" And Jesus said, "I'm not the kind of king they wanted. My kingdom is not of

this world.” So yes, Jesus is king, but his kingship is about bigger things than economies and politics, military might, and taking over earthly territories. His kingship is about serving instead of being served and taking over human hearts. It's about the bigger issues of life, like God, the sinful human condition, relationships, and eternal matters.

Some in this crowd also view this arrival of Jesus on the donkey as a protest, a courageous stepping out against the powers that be: Rome, the unjust crooked system that worked with the Romans, taking advantage of God's people. That's what the zealots of Jesus's day had been hoping for. So, they saw this as a protest movement. The palm branches that were cut and waved and then spread upon that road before Jesus were also known to be symbols of Jewish nationalism. So this part of the crowd sees Jesus as a fellow rebel with a cause standing up against the powers that be. They were expecting Jesus to use his amazing power to lead a revolution and win independence for the nation. Caiaphas, Israel's high priest who despised Jesus, had that in mind as he spoke to his fellow priests who were worried about what Rome would do to all of them if the people revolted under Jesus' leadership. He said, “You know nothing at all, nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”

Jesus should and would die, but not as a rebel revolutionary martyr, or for the reasons the Jewish zealots and the high priests had in mind. His arrival that day was in fact, a protest march, a declaration of war. But it was aimed at powers far greater in scope than the political powers. He had come to do battle against spiritual powers, not with a sword, but with his very life, which he would lay down. There was one person that day who saw this ride into Jerusalem for what it really was. A procession – a funeral procession. And of course, that one person was Jesus. That was what was really going on in this Palm Sunday story. This is a funeral procession. Jesus riding into Jerusalem to die by the end of the week. He was expecting his death. He knew where this all was headed. The shouts of “Hosanna” would change to shouts of “Crucify Him” on Good Friday – just as God planned. Jesus had even talked about this ahead of time with his disciples predicting his death three times to them, even though they didn't understand. He also told them that his ultimate purpose in life was to give his life as a ransom for many. His death would rescue many not from political powers, but three far greater powers that held humanity captive.

First, the power of sin. Since the fall of humans that we read about in Genesis, all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's standards. All of us are born self-centered and fail to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. That separates us from a holy and righteous God who hates sin. And none of us, not a one of us, is capable of doing what it takes to get back into a right relationship with God. Try as we may, all our efforts at trying to get right with God are like attempting to long jump the Grand Canyon. We'll always fall short. We are in bondage, you see, to the power of sin and unable to help ourselves. Jesus once pointed out to his opponents who said, "We're not enslaved to anyone," "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." The apostle Paul lamented this truth about himself when he wrote

For I know that nothing good dwells in me that is in my flesh, for I have the desire to do what's right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I don't do the good I want, but the evil I don't want is what I keep on doing. Now, if I do what I don't want, it's no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. Wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death?

And the answer to that question, my friends, is Jesus – only Jesus, the true God and true man, our Savior who rode into Jerusalem and allowed himself to be nailed to a cruel cross. He who knew no sin, the innocent one, became sin and took upon himself the punishment that you and I deserved. He served himself up as the sinless, atoning sacrifice to purchase our forgiveness and pardon. His blood makes believers in him righteous before God. God then views us the same way as he views his Son, Jesus – as His beloved. As Scripture says, "For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God," right in God's sight, so that we might be made right with Him.

Pastor Robert Webber tells of an encounter he had on a plane from San Francisco to Los Angeles. He wrote,

I was sitting next to the window reading a Christian book, and the man next to me, obviously from the Eastern Hemisphere asked, "Are you a religious man?" "Well, yes," I said. He responded, "I am, too." We began talking about religion in the middle of the conversation, I asked him, "Can you give me a one-liner that captures the essence of your faith?" Well, yes, he said, "We are all part of the problem and we are all part of the solution." We talked about this one liner, a statement I felt was very helpful to understand. And after a while I said, "Would

you like a one-liner that captures the Christian faith?" "Sure," he responded. And here it was. "We are all part of the problem. But there is one man who is the solution. His name is Jesus."

The next power Jesus came to rescue us from was death. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, people were captive to the power of death, hopelessly, helplessly. For the wages of sin is death. Jesus entered into death and conquered it on Easter morning when he walked out of that rich man's tomb alive, risen, resurrected, the sting taken out of death. It no longer can hold believers in Jesus captive. True, this heart of mine will one day stop beating, and so will yours. But because Jesus lives trusting in Him, I shall live also with God forever in His Heaven.

Finally, Jesus was marching into battle to rescue us from the power of the devil. An evil. A great battle took place at that cross with Satan. And Jesus won. Since the fall of humankind and Genesis, the kingdom of darkness had ruled over this world. But God, through Christ Jesus' death and resurrection has delivered believers from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the eternal Kingdom of God. Satan's defeated and will ultimately be destroyed at Christ's second return.

So that's what makes Palm Sunday so special. That's what it's really all about. It's not just about palm branches and singing children and shouting adults and a cute donkey on a busy road. No, something much bigger and greater was happening that day. God's sacrificial and generous love for his sinful, broken world was at work and on display that first Palm Sunday. The sinless, obedient son of God, entered Jerusalem to willingly give himself over to great pain and suffering and death in order to rescue the likes of you and me who could not save ourselves. Such love.

I hope that you grasp the depths of the Father's love for you. I know so many struggle with that concept. But you have been deeply loved. Look what he did for you to make you his own. So, I encourage you this Holy week to ponder this truth, claim it, rejoice in it. Jesus made that ride for me. What wondrous love is this? Oh, my soul. Oh, my soul. Amen.