

JESUS WAS FIT TO REIGN

Matthew 21:1-10

I've said before that I like to read sermons – and that most weeks I do read several. This week, I had been looking on-line for sermons about the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. As I glanced down a list of titles, I clicked on one that I had misread. The title was “Palm Sunday With Fresh Eyes” but as I scanned quickly I had misread it to be “Palm Sunday With French Fries”. I was certainly intrigued and wanted to know how the preacher developed that theme!

I wish there were some way that I could grab your attention like that. I know that many of you grew up in Sunday School and you have heard the story of Palm Sunday since you were little tykes. But I also know that some of you are not all that familiar with the events that are recalled each year on Palm Sunday. My wish for today is that those who have heard the story many times could hear it like those who may be hearing it for the first time. I want all of you to experience Palm Sunday with fresh eyes.

Palm Sunday is the anniversary of the day that Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of his crucifixion and, ultimately, his resurrection.

- On Sunday, he rode into the city and the people proclaimed him as their king.
- On Thursday evening, Jesus kept the Jewish Passover Feast with his disciples and, in the process, instituted what we now refer to as the Lord's Supper.
- Later on Thursday night, Jesus was arrested by the Jews because they were offended by his teachings and jealous of his influence.
- Overnight on Thursday and into Friday, he was tried for treason against the Jewish faith. He was convicted and he was sentenced to die.
- On Friday morning Jesus was executed by being nailed to a cross.
- Close to sundown on Friday, Jesus was hastily buried in a tomb hewn into a rock-face.
- Then on Sunday, Easter Sunday, one week after he entered the city of Jerusalem, Jesus came back to life and walked out of his grave.

So Palm Sunday is the start of what is often called “Holy Week”: the week leading up to Resurrection Sunday. On that day, the city was abuzz with excitement over the news that Jesus was coming to town. They had heard about the truths that he had taught, the miracles he had performed, the people he had healed and even the dead that he had raised. Word on the street was that this man from Galilee was the long-awaited Messiah who was God's Anointed One. The Jews believed that God had already selected, anointed and set apart One who would redeem them from the imperial domination of the Roman Empire; One who would deliver them from Roman rule and free them to be an independent nation. The Jews believed that this Anointed One would lead them in triumph and then reign over them as a wise and benevolent king.

Because of what the people had heard about Jesus, they thought he was the One for whom they had been waiting...longing...praying. So they lined the streets to watch for him.

When Jesus came into Jerusalem, he came on a route that took him near the village of Bethany where he would stay for the week in the home of his friend, Lazarus and with Lazarus' two sisters, Mary and Martha. Now Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem. It was a fairly short walk. And it was a familiar walk. Jesus had made the trek between Bethany and Jerusalem many, many times. But this time, Jesus did not walk. At least he did not walk the entire way. As he got near to Bethany, by prior arrangement, he mounted a donkey and rode into the city. In doing so, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 where the prophet predicted:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I said that it was by prearrangement that Jesus rode a donkey into the city. But I don't know who made the arrangements. Jesus might have had his friend Lazarus make the preparations. Or Jesus might have done so, himself. I don't know. The Bible doesn't say. But the gospel records make it very clear that the disciples hadn't made the arrangements because Jesus had to explain the procedures to them.

As Jesus approached the villages of Bethphage and Bethany, he told two of his disciples to go into the village ahead of them. He told them that at the entrance to the village, they would find a colt tied there on which no one had ever ridden. They were to untie the colt and bring it to him. He told them that if anyone asked why they were untying it, they were to say, "The Lord needs it."

Now, how would Jesus have known there would be a colt tied near the entrance of the village if arrangements had not been made for it to be there on that day and at that time? How would he have known what to tell the disciples to answer if they were questioned about taking the colt if it were not a prearranged code word? Jesus had planned and prepared for this day. And his plans included his riding into the city of Jerusalem on a young donkey upon which no one had ever ridden before.

But why a donkey? Well, first of all, there weren't many horses in that area. Only the rich and the nobility rode horses. But even kings didn't ride on horses very often. When a King came into a city after a conquest, he would ride on a prancing stallion. Horses were associated with war. But ... when the King came into a city riding on a donkey, it was a symbol of peace. It was a sign that peace prevailed. When Jesus entered into the city of Jerusalem riding on a donkey, he would be doing so as the Prince of Peace.

Luke's gospel tells us that when the two disciples went into the village to secure the donkey, the owners did, indeed ask them why they were just walking up and untying it. They replied with the prearranged signal, "The Lord needs it." And the owners allowed the donkey to be taken.

"The owners." This donkey was owned by more than one person. That would indicate to me that the people who owned the donkey were likely very poor. The donkey didn't belong to some rich landowner to whom the donkey was just one of many. The donkey was probably a sizeable investment for each owner. Yet they were willing to loan it to a couple of strangers because they knew that Jesus was going to use it for his entrance into Jerusalem. If all of this is so, it must have been important to Jesus to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus must have put a lot of meticulous planning into how he would enter the city. He must have wanted the people to recognize that he was coming as their Prince of Peace.

The people seem to have grasped the symbolism. According to Luke's account of the events, some in the crowd shouted "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." And others shouted, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest."

We call this "Palm Sunday" because, as Jesus came into the city, people pulled palm branches off of the trees nearby and spread them like a carpet before him. They also waved them as a show of adulation for Jesus.

We call this Palm Sunday because the people waved palm fronds to honor Jesus. We also call his entrance into Jerusalem the Triumphal Entry because although Jesus was recognized as the Prince of Peace, the people also proclaimed him as their king. As Jesus was coming into the city, while some of the people shouted, "Peace in highest heaven and glory in the highest" others were crying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" The masses were proclaiming him as their king...and they were more right than they realized.

But if they were ready to enthrone him as their king, he would only be king for a few days. This was Sunday and by Friday, they thought him unfit to reign. How little they knew!

I am here today to proclaim to you that Jesus was indeed fit to reign!

I. Jesus Is Fit To Reign Because He Was Willing To Serve

These events took place on Sunday...Palm Sunday. As I have already told you on Thursday, just four days later, Jesus celebrated the Jewish Passover Feast with his disciples. During the day, Jesus sent Peter and John to make preparations for him and the rest of the disciples to have a place where they could observe this highest and holiest of Jewish feasts.

Peter and John asked him where he wanted them to have prepared for their group. Jesus said,

“As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there.” (Luke 22:9-12)

Doesn't that sound a little reminiscent of Jesus' instructions regarding the donkey? It was highly unusual for a man to carry a water jar; women nearly always did that job. But Jesus told Peter and John that just inside the city, they would be met by a man carrying a water jar and they were to follow him to the house where he was going and there to ask the owner of the house where the guest room was located where Jesus could eat the Passover with his disciples. The large upstairs room would already be furnished. As with the donkey, so with the upper room, it would appear to me that Jesus had already made all the arrangements. All that was left was for Peter and John to make final preparations for the meal.

When Jesus and the other disciples arrived, they all reclined at the table ready to begin the feast but there was an awkward silence and a bit of embarrassed shuffling. You see, no one had washed the feet of the diners. In that region, people walked dirt roads in open-toed sandals. Their feet were bound to be filthy from sweat and dust.

In that culture, it was the custom for a servant to wash the feet of the guests before the meal. It wasn't just a ritual; it was a practical matter. When a person sat at the table, he actually reclined beside it because the tables were low to the ground. Resting on his left side, a diner's right hand would be free to use to handle the food. But reclining on his left side, a diner's feet would be out to his right, very near the face and plate of the person seated next to him. It was a practical matter to have the servant wash the feet of the guests.

But that night, no one washed the feet of the guests. Peter and John may have forgot. Or they may have assumed that Jesus had already arranged for the owner of the house to supply a servant. After all, Peter and John did not have any servants to whom they could assign that task.

In the awkward silence, I suspect the disciples looked down at their plates and avoided eye contact with one another and especially with Jesus. If Jesus was going to give anyone “that look” that says, “You, you wash the feet” no one wanted him to be looking his way.

In his gospel account, John records that in the deafening silence, Jesus did a most unusual thing. He got up, tied a towel around his waist and

then went from man to man and *HE* washed the feet of the guests. Then he said,

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

If you take a look in the upper room you will see a King who was willing to be a servant to those who should serve him. Jesus’ willingness to serve meant he was fit to reign as King.

II. Jesus Is Fit To Reign Because He Was Willing To Surrender

If you take a look in the upper room you will see a King who was willing to be a servant to those who should serve him. And if you take a glimpse in the Garden of Gethsemane, you will see a King who was willing to surrender his will for the will of God. Jesus wanted to do the will of another instead of insisting on his own will being done.

Jesus knew exactly what lay ahead of him in the next 24 hours. He knew he would be arrested by the Jews. He knew he would be abandoned by his disciples. He knew he would be tried by the Sanhedrin. He knew he would be tortured by the soldiers. He knew he would be executed by the Romans. He knew he would be dead by the next evening.

He also knew he could have prevented all of that from happening. But when he prayed, he said to God, “Not my will but yours be done.” In our world, we think that real leaders are people who never give up, who never concede, who never surrender. But from God’s perspective, the fact that Jesus surrendered to God’s will made him fit to reign as King.

III. Jesus Is Fit To Reign Because He Was Willing To Sacrifice

Jesus was fit to reign because he was willing to serve and because he was willing to surrender. And also because he was willing to sacrifice.

World leaders stay in their offices and sign orders to send other people into battle to suffer and to die. In an earlier time, kings sometimes *led* their armies into battle; they often *sent* their forces into battle; but they never fought the battle on behalf of their troops. Soldiers vow to die for the king; it is never the other way around. But Jesus is the leader who sacrificed himself in battle. Jesus is the king who died for his soldiers.

One summer afternoon, a bunch of kids were involved in a little league baseball game. When one little guy came up to the plate, he looked over

to the coach for a signal. The coach signaled to sacrifice bunt. The little kid promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. The coach ran up to him afterwards and said: "Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice?" "Yes," the boy replied. "But I didn't really think you meant it."

"But I didn't really think you meant it." Is that what we believe about Jesus? Do we think he really didn't mean to be the suffering Messiah? You need to know that he knew what he was doing when he went to Jerusalem on that original Palm Sunday. He knew what he was doing and he knew where he was going. He was going to the cross. He was going to his death. And because he was willing to sacrifice, he is absolutely fit to reign as God's anointed king.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus proved himself fit to reign. There is nothing more he has to prove. All that is left is for you to make the decision to let him reign as *your* king. Can you honestly say to Jesus, "King of my life, I crown thee now..."? I hope you will say that as we stand and as we sing.

INVITATION: #310 – *"Lead Me To Calvary"*