



Ben Blobaum's Sermon

SERMON – PALM SUNDAY

APRIL 2, 2023

“KEEP WATCH AND PRAY”

Everything about who Jesus is, and so, everything that Jesus says and does, reveals who God the Father is and what the kingdom of heaven is like. So, what does Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem reveal to us about God and his kingdom? First, way back in Israel's history, before Israel was defeated, captured, and exiled by the Babylonians, a festal parade into Jerusalem was an annual event. Every year, crowds gathered on the road that led to the temple, for a re-enthronement ceremony for their king. The king would lead the processional entry into Jerusalem, to the Temple of God, where the priests would then pronounce a blessing on the king. The crowds that gathered annually for the king's procession would spread their cloaks on the ground before the king's horse. And all the people would recite Psalm 118 with shouts and cheers as the king rode by.

Listen to these two verses of that Psalm and see if it doesn't sound like Jesus's triumphal entry that we just read in John's Gospel: *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD... Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar* (vv. 26-27)! The annual keeping of this ceremony was an expression of Israel's hope in God's promise to David, that his progeny would rule on his throne forever. And, ultimately, all of Israel's hope was centered singularly in God's promise to send a final, Messianic King, who would deliver Israel from its enemies once and for all and establish the permanent and eternal Reign of God.

But then, around the beginning of the sixth century B.C., Israel's yearly fanfare and jubilation came to a screeching and silencing halt. Just as the prophets warned, on account of the people's persistent disobedience to God, Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians and fell to defeat. The temple was destroyed, and King Zedekiah and the people were taken as captives into exile in Babylon. Zedekiah was the last Davidic king to rule in Jerusalem. Even after Israel returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, no descendant of David ruled in Jerusalem again, and Israel remained a largely subjugated people, ruled by whichever nation rose to power in the region.

For over 600 years, there was no festal procession into the temple in Jerusalem. Until, that is, around 30 A.D., when a descendant of David, named Jesus, raised Lazarus from the dead. Israel's Messianic hope was re-ignited, and crowds streamed out to see Jesus. Reciting Psalm 118, with their shouts of, *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*, the crowd was expressing their explicit hope that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah King.

We said at the beginning that Jesus – in who he is and in everything he says and does – reveals God the Father and his kingdom. Note that Jesus does not deny the kingship that the crowd ascribes to him. He doesn't pump the brakes on their royal procession and fanfare. No, the crowd, consisting mostly of the poor and the commoner, has it exactly right: Jesus is “the King of Israel” (v. 13).

But the fact that Jesus chooses to ride a donkey, and not even an adult donkey, but a foal, this is unprecedented for a king and, so, it reveals something unique and unexpected about this King and his Kingdom. If Jesus had, in typical kingly fashion, processed into the royal city on a horse, there would have been no mistaking this as a military exercise, a king rallying his people for war against their enemies. But by choosing a humble and lowly donkey, Jesus is signaling that he comes in peace and that the kingdom he came to establish is one of peace.

Moreover, contrary to the expectations of many in Israel, Jesus came to establish peace not by bringing the oppressive Romans into submission through military conquest. The peace that Jesus came to establish was not simply peace between earthly enemies, but, ultimately, peace between God and God's earthly enemies – the whole human race, in which Israel also was implicated.

And the kingdom that Jesus came to establish was not an earthly kingdom. King Jesus came to earth to establish the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom in which all wars would finally cease, and the peace of God would be all-pervasive.

But don't let the donkey mislead you, Jesus's procession into Jerusalem was indeed a military parade, and King Jesus is readying for war. But the war Jesus wages is against much more powerful enemies than Israel could have imagined. For Jesus came to wage war against the forces and powers that hold Israel and all of humanity captive: sin, death, and the devil.

How do we hold these two aspects of Jesus in tension – Jesus as warrior and Jesus as gentle peacemaker?

In some places in the Bible, Jesus is depicted as a lion; in other places, he's depicted as a lamb. In truth, Jesus is all-at-once both. And this paradox is on display in his triumphal entry to Jerusalem.

Riding into Jerusalem to wage war against Satan and all his forces, Jesus is a matchlessly ferocious lion. Riding into Jerusalem on a *foal*, however, foreshadows the way Jesus will defeat that ancient foe; namely, by laying down his life as the once-for-all sacrificial lamb, to take away the sin of the world. Recall that, in John's Gospel, references to "the world" are rarely neutral, but that, instead, John uses "the world" to refer to all people, specifically in their lostness and rebellion against God. Thus, when John records the Pharisees watching the fanfare of the crowd accompanying Jesus into Jerusalem, and they exasperatedly exclaim, "the whole *world* is going after him" (v. 19), the Pharisees are unwittingly testifying to the fact that it is sinners – those who know their need for a savior – that are going after Jesus.

Jesus is the King of Israel, and he came to establish his Reign over the whole earth. But Jesus is a king who brings sinners under his Reign not through military might, but by making peace with them through his shed blood. That's where the Story is headed this week. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. And that word "holy" doesn't simply mean "set apart" in a general sense; it means specifically, "set apart for God," or "set apart to God."

This week, I want to encourage you to set apart time to simply walk with Jesus, to walk with him on his journey into Jerusalem that will lead him to the cross. And I want to suggest to you a way to do this. John's Gospel is basically divided in two: the first half covers Jesus's earthly ministry, and the second half covers the final week of his life.

What that means is that, in the second half of John's Gospel, time slows way, way down. The first 11 chapters cover *three years* of public ministry; the final 10 chapters cover ... one week. Beginning in chapter 12, time slows way down, and John takes his readers almost hour-by-hour through the final days of Jesus's life. In your devotion time this week, if you pick up in chapter 12, where our reading in John left off this morning, and you read just over one chapter each day, you will keep watch with Jesus on his road to the cross.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, that is just what Jesus urged his disciples to do: to keep "watch with [him] and pray, that [they] might not fall into temptation" (Mat. 26:38, 41). That is the very posture that is to characterize the Christian life in this world – watchfulness and prayer, so that when the Master returns, we might be found among the crowd rejoicing, *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

Amen.