

“The King of Israel”

The Fortieth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 12:12-26; Psalm 118:14-26

There are times when things are not what they seem. What appears to be a spontaneous moment of triumph and joy when Jesus enters Jerusalem to return the nation to greatness, is actually a sign of Israel's unbelief and hardness of heart. The people sense the obvious messianic significance of David's son entering his royal city. But for the citizens of Israel, this was a political event with religious implications, not the moment when Jesus enters Jerusalem as the prince of peace, and suffering servant who will lay down his life for his sheep. What looks like the culmination of his three year public ministry—the messiah has come to his royal city in a triumphal procession—is but a step on the way to Jesus' cross and empty tomb. This is a day of joy because Scripture is being fulfilled and Jesus must obey his Father's will to secure our salvation. But on this day, the crowds do not understand the true meaning of what they were seeing. Israel's moment has come, but the people do not understand the significance of what is happening.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John, and we have come to Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem—commonly celebrated in Christian churches on Palm Sunday. There are few events recorded in all four gospels—Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem is one of them. As we have seen during our time in John 11-12—which is the literary hinge of John's Gospel uniting our Lord's messianic mission (the first ten chapters) and our Lord's Upper Room Discourse and Passion (chapters 13-21)—Jesus' messianic mission is rapidly coming to its conclusion. Jesus has raised his close friend Lazarus from the dead, proving that he is the Son of God and Israel's Messiah. Sadly, the Sanhedrin's response to Jesus' seventh miracle is to issue a warrant for Jesus' arrest—which provides a pretext to put Jesus to death. The Sanhedrin takes this action against Jesus because of their collective fear that Jesus is attracting large numbers of followers and this might provoke the Romans to remove the Sanhedrin from power.

As we saw at the end of John 11, when people became aware of the Pharisees' order that anyone who saw Jesus or who knew where he was, was to immediately report that information to the Sanhedrin, a buzz began to spread throughout Jerusalem. Would Jesus dare come to the city to celebrate the Passover, knowing that if he did so he would be arrested and put to death? That question is definitively answered “yes” when Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph the Sunday before the Passover. Jesus will defy the Sanhedrin because his chief concern is obedience to his Father's will and that he accomplish all that the Father has sent him to accomplish. And this he will do.

In fact, the best indication we have regarding the true meaning of Jesus' entrance into the city on Palm Sunday actually came the evening before, during a dinner given by Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the home of Simon the leper. After the dinner concluded, Mary took a large amount of nard (a year's wages worth) and anointed Jesus' head, body, and feet, wiping them with her hair. When Judas complained that the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor, Jesus rebuked him. Jesus tells Judas and the assembled group, “*leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.*” Although the folks in Simon's home were probably taken aback by Jesus' rebuke of Judas, and certainly did not yet grasp the full meaning of all that Jesus said, his statement that Mary was going to anoint him for the day of his burial reveals what lay ahead in the coming days. Jesus will enter Jerusalem in great triumph the next day, but by Friday afternoon of the Passover, Jesus will be dead, and once again, Mary will anoint her Lord's

body in preparation for his burial, exactly as Jesus had foretold.

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and with large numbers of people believing in him, the question was thick in the air, “what will happen next?” The Pharisees and the high priest (Caiaphas) had made it plain what they wanted to see done about Jesus, and with Passover just days away and with pilgrims flocking into the city, no doubt, everyone wondered what the Romans would do. The Romans did not care a whit about Jewish theological debates. But as the military occupiers of Israel, they expected the Sanhedrin to keep the peace. If not, the Romans would act with great force. With all of these fears and realities present, something big was about to happen and everyone knew it. Jesus was about to set in motion events which would forever change the course of human history.

We pick up with John’s account in verse 12, where we read, “*the next day [Sunday] the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.*” When John tells us that a large crowd was present in Jerusalem, he means very “large.” According to the Jewish historian Josephus, one year (at some point between the death and resurrection of Jesus, but before the Jewish War with Rome in AD 66-70), an estimated 2,700,000 people took part in the annual Passover celebration.¹ Even if Josephus’ number is greatly inflated, the fact of the matter is that Jerusalem was packed-out with pilgrims during the annual Passover—this year was no exception.

In fact, when John tells us the crowds that year learned that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, the likelihood is that pilgrims had seen him on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, and the word quickly spread like wildfire back to Jerusalem that Jesus was indeed going to enter the city, despite the possibility of arrest. Hearing that Jesus was approaching and was about to enter the city, people poured out of Jerusalem (and the surrounding areas) and began heading down the road leading from Jerusalem to Bethany. The people wanted to see Jesus, and they wanted to witness, or even be part of what was sure to be the most memorable event in recent Jewish history.

As Jesus approaches his royal city, a processional spontaneously forms and this quickly becomes an event of biblical proportions. We read in verse 13, “*so they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’*” Date palms grew everywhere, so palm fronds were easy to find. Even though there is nothing in the Old Testament which prescribed the use of palm branches at the Passover, they were to be used at the Feast of Tabernacles and were tied to a myrtle branch and waved by the people. But the Feast was already past. Since the time that Simon had driven the Maccabees out of Jerusalem in 141 BC, the waving of palm branches had become a sort of national symbol throughout Israel—like waving the flag or chanting “USA”. The very fact that the people were now waving Palm branches is an indication that as Jesus approaches the city, the people see him as a messianic liberator.² The expectation was that Jesus has come to claim his throne, and he will then lead the nation to victory over Rome.

The chants from the crowd are loaded with messianic images, and well-known verses from the Old Testament associated with the kingship of David a millennium earlier. Hosanna is a word which means “give us salvation!” and is found in Psalm 118:25 (part of our Old Testament lesson—and why we’ve been reading and singing from it these past few Sundays). This is exactly what Jesus is entering Jerusalem to

¹ Cited in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 431.

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 432.

do—give God’s people the free gift of salvation. Yet, sadly, the crowds are completely misguided in their zeal and they mistakenly see Jesus as a political figure just as David had been, and not as the Savior from sin. They people are right to be excited. But they are excited about the wrong thing.

The crowds spontaneously chant from Psalm 118:26, “*blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*” This Psalm was well-known, and was sung by the temple choir during the Feast of Tabernacles, and Feast of Dedication, and even during the Passover. A popular Psalm, it refers to the blessing received by all those who go up to the temple seeking forgiveness of sin and offering prayers to YHWH. To this verse, however, the crowds add the phrase “*even the king of Israel.*” Although this is likely a reference to king David, the crowds clearly see in Jesus, David’s true successor.

The entire scene is one of a spontaneous celebration of joy and excitement, and is grounded in the messianic expectation that in Jesus, Israel will have a king again. But, sadly, the people are missing the whole point as to why Jesus is entering the city. Jesus is bringing salvation. He is blessed by the crowd. But what the crowds overlook is the fact that it is Jesus who is to pronounce YHWH’s blessing upon all those who make the trek up to the Jerusalem temple to worship YHWH. Jesus is not only David’s biological descendant, he is that king promised to David in 2 Samuel 7. His rule may be everlasting, but it is not a mere political rule as the people expected. Jesus was not king David part II. In fact, Jesus is David’s greater son and David’s Lord. On this day the crowd has forgotten the opening verse of Psalm 110. “*The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’*”

The crowd is right to make the connection between Jesus and David, and Jesus’ right to hold the kingly office of Israel, currently held by the Roman appointee and lackey—Herod. Yet, the salvation Jesus was bringing to Israel was not deliverance from Roman occupation. Jesus had not come to displace the Sanhedrin and establish his own political rule. What the crowd does not yet realize is that Jesus will not be the kind of king Israel the people of Israel seek and expect. On this day, the crowds love Jesus, they sing messianic anthems to him, they wave Palm branches demonstrating their patriotism. They line the road in droves, cheering, chanting, singing. But when they discover what kind of king Jesus truly is, and that he came to conquer an enemy far greater than Rome, the same crowds will quickly turn on Jesus. Many of these same people will be in Pilate’s hall on Friday morning shouting “crucify him, crucify him.” The people of Israel were desperate for relief, and this desperation blinds them to the truth.

According to verses 14–15, “*and Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’*” A king rides a war-horse, and that animal is decked out for occasions like this with ornate symbols of royalty and images of conquest. A king usually enters his royal city with his honor guard leading the way, and his chief lieutenants following in his train. His defeated foes follow in chains, both to humiliate his enemies and to warn his subjects not to cross him. But on this day, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a the young colt of a donkey. Jesus has not come to save Israel from Rome (the salvation the people were seeking). Jesus comes not as a military conqueror, but as the Prince of Peace, in direct fulfillment of an ancient prophecy written hundreds of years before in Zechariah 9:9. “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*”

Jesus has come as a gentle king—not a political zealot. He did not come to start a war with Rome, but to put an end to war (which he will do when he returns at the end of the age). The same passage in Zechariah 9 (specifically verse 10), speaks of a world-wide reign of David’s royal son. Earlier in his prophecy, Zechariah tells us that this messianic king will open a fountain of blood in Jerusalem which

will set free all the people of God from both the guilt and power of sin. Jesus is bringing that salvation promised in the Bible verses the people were singing, but which they did not really understand.

The two events which best explain what Jesus is doing and why, are completely lost on the crowds. First, the night before, Mary anointed Jesus for his death and burial using expensive perfume, and she will do so again when she prepares her Lord's body for burial on Friday before sundown. Therefore, Jesus will fulfill his messianic mission by dying and shedding his blood for the sins of his people. The second thing people do not understand is the timing of Jesus' entrance into the city. Jesus is not entering Jerusalem to pick a fight with the Pharisees, nor to disrupt the Passover as a trouble-maker. Rather, Jesus is entering Jerusalem as Israel's true Passover lamb. Jesus will not just celebrate the Passover, he will fulfill it. He is the sinless sacrificial lamb and the perfect high priest who offers the once-for-all sacrifice for sin—himself. It is through his death and resurrection that Jesus will save his people. But on this day, the crowd longs for the defeat of Rome. They sing “hosanna” but do not comprehend its true meaning.

That said, we must cut the people present this day some slack. The people of Israel chaffed under Roman occupation. The Antonia Fortress stood next to the temple wall and housed the occupying Roman garrison. The Roman governor (Pilate) usually remained in Caesarea (a city to the north), but often came to Jerusalem on official government business. Pilate, apparently, had nothing but contempt for the Jews. The Romans hated Jerusalem. It was off the beaten path, hot and desolate, and with its temple and Jewish religion so thoroughly offensive to Roman sensitivities, this was not the place to be stationed. But since there was the constant threat of Jewish insurrection, the Romans kept a large garrison there.

Likewise, the Jews hated their Roman occupiers and their legion banners which proclaimed Caesar (not YHWH) as God. The people eagerly looked to Jesus to rescue them from this difficult situation because they knew that Herod was driven by Roman political intrigue, not his faith in YHWH, nor by his desire to see his people prosper. The Jewish people hated the Sanhedrin (which they knew to be corrupt), and especially the self-righteous Pharisees who demonstrated their superior holiness at every possible opportunity. And so when Jesus came as a miracle worker and messianic figure, preaching deliverance, the people desperately hoped that YHWH had sent Jesus to deliver them from this oppressive situation, and to restore their nation to its former greatness.

The people got the first part right. YHWH did indeed send Jesus to his people—the miracles proved that much. But Jesus came to deal with the root cause of all deplorable situations such as this—the guilt and bondage of human sin. Rome, Herod, and the Pharisees, were but symptoms of a much deeper and more fundamental problem—the sinful human heart, and the fact that ours is a fallen race estranged from God. This is why, as John recounts these events years later, he must explain how it is only after Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, his death, and resurrection, that Jesus' disciples could truly understand what had happened on Palm Sunday. He tells us in verse 16, that *“his disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.”* On the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, everyone (and understandably so) was caught up in the expectation that Israel's greatest day had come. The cross and the empty tomb made no sense on this day. But looking back, John can now see what all of this truly meant.

Sadly, the ole green-eyed monster (jealousy) rears its ugly head. According to John, *“the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.”* As the culmination of his messianic mission, the raising of Lazarus was not only a glimpse of things to come—Jesus own resurrection from the dead just one week later—but it also pointed ahead to the general

resurrection at the end of the age. This was a miracle which demanded a decision—which is why many now believed in Jesus. People had known Lazarus, knew of his death, and had been to his home and grave to pay respects. But the man was now alive—making it hard to doubt or deny Jesus’ claims. Many of them had seen Jesus raise him, or had seen Lazarus after he had been raised. No doubt, people came to gawk at him. These folks were among those following Jesus up the road from Bethany to Jerusalem.

The other group were people in Jerusalem (inhabitants or pilgrims) who had heard of Jesus and Lazarus. When word came to the city that Jesus was on his way there, people flooded out of the city to see for themselves the man who could raise the dead. The Sanhedrin (and especially the Pharisees) knew that with so many of their fellow citizens now following Jesus, cheering for him, rejoicing as he entered the city, their plan to have Jesus arrested would have to be shelved for the time being. In verse 19, John reports that “*the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’*” The Pharisees realize that their plan is getting them nowhere. To them it looked like the whole world was following Jesus. They are furious. The fact of Jesus’ popularity upsets them every bit as much as their fear that the Romans will at some point intervene with great force. They will wait for another opportunity to arrest Jesus, an opportunity which will be provided for them by one of Jesus own disciples—a certain Judas Iscariot.

In verses 20-26, John tells us about a group of “Greeks” who came to see Jesus. These may be Greek-speaking Jews or Greek-speaking Gentiles who may have been converts to Judaism (proselytes). More likely, they are God-fearers, Gentiles who believed in the one true God and who came to Jerusalem during the feasts because of the spectacle of it all—like non-Roman Catholic tourists who go to the Vatican on Christmas Eve or Easter because they are impressed by the events and their importance. Such Greeks would have been admitted to the Court of the Gentiles (at the Jerusalem temple), but could not have entered into the inner courts where only Jews were permitted. In verse 20, John describes them in very general terms as follows, “*now among those who went up to worship at the feast [the Passover] were some Greeks.*” The Passover had become a patriotic event as much as a religious one. Whoever these Greeks were, apparently, they came to Jerusalem regularly during the feasts.

Intrigued perhaps by all of the accounts of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and even perhaps by Jesus driving the money-changers from the court of the Gentiles (after he entered the city on Palm Sunday), these men approach the disciples asking to speak to Jesus. We read in verses 21-22, that “*So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.’*” Although John does not give us a specific time reference, if some time has elapsed between verse 19 (Palm Sunday) and 20 (say Monday or Tuesday of Easter week) these men were approaching the disciples after the events recounted in Mark 11:15-17, in which Jesus clears out the merchants and money lenders from the temple a second time.³

If Jesus was so angry at what the merchants and money-changers had done to the Court of the Gentiles—corrupting that very space where Gentiles were allowed to come and worship YHWH, well then, they may have reasoned, that Jesus was truly concerned about the spiritual plight of Gentiles such as themselves who were not Jews, but who may have believed that YHWH was the true and living God. They approach Philip, who had a Greek name and who came from the Galilee region, which is a good indication that these men came from the Decapolis area (the ten Roman cities) north of the Sea of Galilee. Philip, in turn, tells Andrew about these men, and Andrew tells Jesus, who then speaks to them.

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 436.

According to verse 23, “*And Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’*” We are not told what the Greeks wanted of Jesus, or what Jesus may have said to them previously. But Jesus does use this encounter with Greeks, to announce that his hour has come. This is quite remarkable in light of the broader context of the events transpiring. Prior to this verse, whenever Jesus speaks of his hour, it is always future. Now, he says, his hour is at hand. The irony should jump out at us. By all appearances, the people of Jerusalem (representative of all Israel) have embraced Jesus as their Davidic king. But this is not the hour of which Jesus is speaking. The reality is that the Jews are rejecting the salvation Jesus has brought them—seeking instead freedom from the Romans and a restoration of Israel’s greatness, not seeking salvation from the wrath of God due to the guilt of sin.

Here in Jerusalem are a group of Greeks (Gentiles) seeking to speak with Jesus, while Israel is poised to reject their Messiah, and then put him to death. Amazing, these are the men to whom Jesus chooses to reveal the fact that his hour has come. That his messianic mission has come to its end, and that his Passion is about to begin is clear from what Jesus says next to these Greeks in verses 24-25, “*truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*” Jesus uses the solemn, “truly, truly,” formula—which means, “pay attention, what I am about to say is very important.” Soon Jesus will be glorified, which means his impending death (the grain of wheat which dies) must end in his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven—returning to the glory he possessed in the presence of the Father for all eternity. If Jesus is not raised, then the grain dies and does not germinate. But if Jesus is raised, the seed germinates, sprouts to life, and bears fruit.

Paul uses this same image of Jesus’ resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36-38. “*What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.*” This is also why in the same passage (v. 20), Paul can speak of Jesus’ resurrection as “*the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*” Jesus will die for the sins of his people. He will be raised from the dead. And he then will ascend into heaven in glorified human flesh. Jesus will indeed be glorified because his hour **has** come. And he reveals this to Gentiles.

That person who truly loves life must be willing to lose it—since our very lives come not from anything we have done, but from the sovereign will of God. Any one who follows Jesus—he tells the Greeks—must be willing to hate this life, if necessary, to enter eternal life. This is but another way of saying what Jesus has said in Mark 8:34-36. “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*” Jesus is explaining what he is about to do, and how this will impact all who follow him, like these Greeks who are the first among a countless host of Gentiles who will indeed lose their lives to receive his.

And so Jesus tells them, “*if anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.*” Jesus is about to do something which none of us can do (fulfill all righteousness). At first glance this looks as though it will be impossible to follow him as he commands. But when Jesus is raised from the dead, this will all become very clear. We give up our lives when we are given new life, place our trust in Jesus, and become his disciples. If we lose our lives and embrace the eternal life Jesus gives as free gift, then the Father will honor us, just as he does his beloved Son. If not, then we will be like Israel on Palm Sunday, blind to the truth which plays out before our very eyes. On Palm Sunday, the king of Israel has come to his people. And even though the people celebrate this great event, they have missed the whole point. Things are not what they seem.

For this king conquers by dying and is then raised for our justification.