

Zechariah 9:9 (NRSV)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Matthew 21:1–13 (CEB)

When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus gave two disciples a task. ²He said to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter, you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anybody says anything to you, say that the Lord needs it.” He sent them off right away. ⁴Now this happened to fulfill what the prophet said, ⁵*Say to Daughter Zion, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the donkey’s offspring.”* ⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus had ordered them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and laid their clothes on them. Then he sat on them.

⁸Now a large crowd spread their clothes on the road. Others cut palm branches off the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds in front of him and behind him shouted, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*” ¹⁰And when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up. “Who is this?” they asked. ¹¹The crowds answered, “It’s the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

¹²Then Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those who were selling and buying there. He pushed over the tables used for currency exchange and the chairs of those who sold doves. ¹³He said to them, “It’s written, *My house will be called a house of prayer.* But you’ve made it a hideout for crooks.”

In the immortal words of Etta James, “At last . . .”

Look back over your life. Have you ever waited and waited for some event or moment to arrive? You wanted it so badly that you could hardly put it into words. But that wait had been so long you had nearly given up hope it would ever come to pass. And now you were anxious, frustrated, still hopeful, angry, and determined all at the same time. If you can recall or imagine the emotions that would swirl around inside you, then you can perhaps walk a bit in the shoes of many first-century Jews.

Longing for a king

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel’s greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). *But . . .* four hundred years after David’s death, Jerusalem burned. The temple built by David’s son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people were in exile. The king of Israel was dead. Indeed, to many Israelites it must have seemed as if God had abandoned them.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were “kings” only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, the Jews had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come, such as in today’s passage from Zechariah. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, when all the world would see that the Jews’ confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God's king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God's kingdom, more than a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar.

The true King

In 27AD or so, one Jew, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, this Jew, named Jesus, had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the Kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy not vengeance, and peace not rebellion. Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike the prophets of old, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God's people. Not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, but Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God's people.

As Mark tells us in today's passage, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But, as he had done so often, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Hundreds of years before, the prophet of Zechariah told of God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but the crowds certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom

Zechariah

Zechariah was a prophet working in Judah in the years immediately after King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home from exile in Babylonia. Thus, Zechariah is among the "post-exilic" prophets.

The book of Zechariah contains prophetic writings and visions aimed at encouraging the Jews to rebuild the temple and stay true to God. Zechariah brought them God's promises that the future of Jerusalem and the Jews was bright, and that, one day, Israel's king would return to Jerusalem in triumph.

Zechariah is one of the twelve "minor" prophets, whose writings close our Old Testament. It is important to realize that "minor" refers only to the length of these books, not their importance!

with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They waved palm branches¹, symbols of abundance and thanks.

The enthusiasm of the crowds was lost on no one. The Pharisees, the keepers of the old way, were obviously frustrated with the whole thing, for they muttered to themselves, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19).

However, Jesus knew that the enthusiasm of the crowds would soon falter. He knew that unless he gave up his course and abandoned the vocation given him by the Father, his confrontation with the Jewish leadership and the Romans would soon come to a head. But of course, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way to the cross. Thanks be to God!

Later in the week, after more confrontations with those who would not hear his words of warning, Jesus would be arrested, tried, and hung to die on a Roman cross, a humiliating death reserved for those who challenged Roman authority. Rather

¹ John is the only Gospel writer to tell us that the leaves are palm branches. Jews used palms in the Festival of Tabernacles, a time of harvest thanksgiving remembering the wanderings in the wilderness. See Leviticus 23:39-43.

than the triumphant returning king entering Jerusalem, Jesus would wear a crown of thorns under a mocking sign, “King of the Jews.” God’s victory won on a cross. A world turned upside down.

At last

And so it comes full circle. This series began with the story of the Passover and the Exodus. Now, a dozen centuries later, palms are waved as Jesus enters Jerusalem to begin the celebration of the Passover, the meal of freedom from bondage to sin and slavery.

It was real. It happened. God’s people had waited so long and, at last, God had stepped into history to do for his people what they were unable to do for themselves, ushering in God’s kingdom. Though all creation would still await the final consummation of the kingdom, its arrival meant nothing would ever be the same again.

Now, another two millennia later, we still await the consummation of the kingdom, and we strive to live lives fully consonant with God’s kingdom, lives marked by compassion and joy, kindness and mercy, putting the interests of others ahead of our own. To hearken back to last week, such are the wedding clothes we don as we come to the marriage supper of the Lamb. We cannot do otherwise. How could we? Jesus is Lord!

A Royal Reception

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Matthew’s account of Palm Sunday is laden with these symbols.

Four hundred years before Jesus, the prophet of Zechariah told about God’s king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt (Zech 9:9). Jesus used this imagery and entered Jerusalem on a colt.

We may have trouble seeing Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but his followers certainly didn’t. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted “Hosanna!” meaning “save us.” They hailed him as the “Son of David.” They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel’s oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They even waved palm branches, which were symbols of abundance and thanks. All this was a welcome that was fit for a king.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is hailed as the returning king. But, only a few days later, the crowd shouts “crucify him!” What do you think may explain the crowds’ swift move from an enthusiastic high for Jesus to their abandonment of him? Are there parallels to our own Christian walk? There are times when our own enthusiasm and commitment to Christ are seemingly unbounded – we really feel it! But at other times, the reality of Jesus can seem remote and distant; we feel cold and spiritually dry. Why is this? What can we do to stay more constant in our relationship with God? How do you get through periods of spiritual dryness when you do not feel close to God?
2. For all Jews other than those living in Jerusalem, the great Festivals, like Passover, were times of pilgrimage. Thousands of Jews from all over Palestine would stream to Jerusalem to gather at God’s temple in unity and celebration as the people of God. What place do pilgrimages have in our lives? Are there pilgrimages you make? Many families make pilgrimages at certain holidays, gathering to celebrate together. Unfortunately, many of us have a tendency to exhaust ourselves in these “pilgrimages.” What ought to characterize our pilgrimages? The coming week leads us to the holiest days in the Christian calendar: Maundy Thursday (the Last Supper), Good Friday (Jesus’ crucifixion and death), and Easter (Jesus’ resurrection). As we finish our pilgrimage to these days, how will you complete your preparation?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| Monday, Leviticus 23: 39-43 Palms are to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles, a time of thanksgiving 2 Kings 9:11-13 Cloaks are laid out at Jehu's anointing as king | Tuesday, Zechariah 9:9-17 The King of peace; God scatters his people and gathers them back together |
| Wednesday, Jeremiah 7:1-23 God sends Jeremiah to stand in the gates of the Temple and declare that the leaders have made it a den of thieves. | Thursday, John 12:1-19 John's account is the only one to mention palm branches specifically! |
| Friday, Mark 11:1-10 Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem | Weekly Joys and Concerns |

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Philippians

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series:

Growing Up Jesus

Beginning April 3: *Making Sense of Revelation:
The Theology of John's Apocalypse*

Sermon Notes
