

“Blessed Is the King!”

Luke 19:28-40

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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Palm Sunday

About a thousand years before Jesus, a new king came riding into Jerusalem seated on a mule. That king was Solomon, one of the sons of King David. David was still alive but very old and infirm, and there was conflict over who would succeed him. David knew who he wanted that to be: out of all his sons, he wanted the throne to go to his son Solomon. To secure Solomon's place in the eyes of the people, David arranged for Solomon to arrive triumphantly in Jerusalem. David instructed his servants: "Have my son Solomon ride on my own mule and bring him down to Gihon." Gihon was a natural spring below the city of Jerusalem; it was the city's primary source of water; residents of Jerusalem would fetch water from this spring day after day. The mule was, like any mule, a cross between a horse and a donkey. David continued: "There let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet and say, 'Long live King Solomon!'" That act would ceremoniously install Solomon as the new king of Israel. David instructed that, after this anointing and installation, his servants should escort the new king up the hill into the city: "You shall go up following him. Let him enter and sit on my throne; he shall be king in my place, for I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah." (1 Kings 1:33-35) David's servants did exactly as instructed: "the priest Zadok, the prophet Nathan, Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule and led him to Gihon. There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, 'Long live King Solomon!' And all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise." (1 Kings 1:38-40) Do any elements of that story sound familiar?

About 500 years later – after the city of Jerusalem had been sacked and burned by the invading Babylonian army, and its citizens carried off into exile – the prophet Zechariah envisioned a time when a future king would come riding into Jerusalem, in a manner similar to Solomon of old: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! / Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! / See, your king comes to you; / triumphant and victorious is he, / humble and riding on a donkey, / on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) This new king would usher in an era of peace, in which the people of Israel would be free from tyrannical overlords, free from the chains of oppression, free to rejoice at their liberation from bondage: "he shall command peace to the nations; / his dominion shall be from sea to sea / and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zechariah 9:10); "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; / today I declare that I will restore to you double" (Zechariah 9:12); "the Lord God will sound the trumpet / and march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. / The Lord of hosts will protect them" (Zechariah 9:14-15); "On that day the Lord their God will save them, / for they are the flock of his people, / for like the jewels of a crown / they shall shine on his land" (Zechariah 9:16). Zechariah anticipated that one day a new king would arise

and lead his people into freedom. This heraldic king would enter the city of Jerusalem riding on a donkey, surrounded by the jubilant sounds of the multitude of the people, rejoicing and celebrating.

Another 500 years passes. The Jewish people are once again living under the oppression of a mighty empire. This time it's the Romans, who took control of the land after Pompey "the Great" seized the city of Jerusalem in the year 63 BC. From that time forth, the Jews who lived in the land were forced to pay taxes to Rome, though they had no say in governmental affairs. Their tax collectors fleeced the poor. The Romans governed fairly leniently, allowing the Jews to worship as they pleased, but whenever there was any unrest, they came down *hard*. Every now and then a Jewish rebel would try to mount an opposition against the Roman overlords; every time, they failed, and their revolt brutally quashed. The Jews had little choice but to accept life as it was – although many of them longed for a day when their honor and dignity would be restored, a day when a long-expected Messiah would come, who would win victory over their enemies and usher in a new era of peace, emanating from Jerusalem.

Here comes Jesus, with a crowd of followers. They've ascended from Jericho in the Jordan River valley, climbing about 3500 feet. They paused briefly near the top of the Mount of Olives, on the east side of Jerusalem, in the villages of Bethphage and Bethany, because Jesus wanted to ride on a colt (a young donkey) the rest of the way. Think about this: he's spent the last several years walking all around Galilee and the surrounding regions; he's just traveled about 90 miles from Galilee to Jericho, and then another 18 miles from Jericho to Jerusalem, and there's no indication that he ever rode an animal at any time on *any* of those journeys – until now. Now, near the top of the Mount of Olives, he's got only about two miles to go, and it's pretty much all downhill. Why, after all those many miles, does he need a donkey for that final stretch of the journey? Because he was tired and worn out from the journey? No. Because his feet needed a break? No. Because he wanted to *demonstrate* something? Yes.

He knew what he was doing. He knew what kind of impression this was going to make. He knew exactly what this would mean – to the Jews who were coming along behind him, or expectantly waiting for him, and also to the powers-that-be, the Jewish leaders and the Roman overlords. *Anybody who knew their Bible stories would have recognized the similarity between this journey and the journey that Solomon took, when he became king.* The route is not quite the same, but it's very similar. They ascended to Jerusalem on a donkey (or a mule), surrounded by a jubilant, cheering crowd. In Solomon's case, "all the people went up following him, playing on pipes and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth quaked at their noise" (1 Kings 1:40). In Jesus's case, "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen" (Luke 19:37). For Solomon, the people were shouting, "Long live King Solomon!" (1 Kings 1:39); for Jesus, the people were shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38). There are too many similarities for this to be a coincidence. Jesus knew what he was doing; he knew what this symbolized; *and anybody who knew their scriptures would have known it too.* Many people expect him to do something dramatic, something *drastic*, that will upend Roman rule. Jews are excited. Romans are worried. But he doesn't do that. Not yet. Not in *this* way.

The parallels between Jesus and Solomon diverge at this point. Solomon becomes King; he enlarges the military, builds a temple, establishes a significant amount of trade with foreign nations, becomes very wealthy, and teaches wisdom. Solomon's reign lasted for *forty years*. Jesus, on the other hand, is arrested and executed mere *days* after entering Jerusalem. He never sat on a throne. He never

had a military. He never built any temples. He never had commercial trading partners. He never became wealthy. He *did* teach wisdom, but their stories couldn't be more different. From one point of view, Solomon's reign appears to have been a tremendous success, while Jesus's never got off the ground.

Except ... it did. Indeed, it would *surpass* all of Solomon's might and majesty, all of Solomon's glory and grandeur, all of Solomon's wealth and wisdom. Jesus was never a king *on* earth. He just became King *over* the earth. Solomon's kingdom was very large; Christ's kingdom is *tremendously* larger. Solomon's kingdom endured a very long time; Christ's kingdom will endure *eternally*.

So Jesus enters Jerusalem, hailed as a King, yet his kingdom doesn't begin yet. There are a few more days ahead for Jesus. Days of conflict. Days of tension. A day of betrayal. A day of agony. A day in a tomb. Then, finally, the day after that ... well, that's when Christ's kingdom starts to emerge.

So there are a few more things that need to happen. A few more events in our annual retelling of the Gospel story. A few more chapters to go. A few more days to wait. A few more things Jesus needs to do, a few more things his followers need to do, a few more things his opponents will do, and one critical moment when one of Jesus's disciples does something that he thinks he *needs* to do ... and Jesus lets him do it. We're getting *close* to the inauguration of Christ's kingdom ... but we're not there yet.

Seven days from now is Easter. Many Christians will go to church today, and they'll go to church next Sunday, and they won't think much about what happens in between. Please don't be one of those. Many of the most important moments in the Gospel story happen *between* the events of Palm Sunday and Easter morning. These are, to borrow a phrase, our "high holy days." The seven days each year when we remember *just what exactly Christ went through* ... and just what, exactly, it means for us.

So I invite you. I invite you to join us Thursday night, at 7:00, here in this Sanctuary, as we commemorate Jesus's last meal with his disciples. We'll read some scripture. We'll offer some prayers. The choir will sing some great music. I'll have a few words to say. Most importantly, we will gather around the table of the Lord, and I will offer, to each of you individually, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We will experience the grace of God anew. You are, of course, welcome to watch from home. But to fully experience the magnificent grace of God, poured out for you, you might want to be here.

I invite you to join us again on Friday at noon, here in this Sanctuary, as we remember and commemorate Jesus's last hours on this earth. We'll read some scripture. We'll offer some prayers. The choir will sing some great music. I'll have a few more words to say. Most importantly, we will reflect on the sacrifice that Jesus made for each one of us. For me. For you. For the people you love. For the people you *don't* love. For the people like you. For the people *not* like you. For the whole entire world.

Then, after all that, I invite you back a week from today. To rejoice in triumph. I say this every year; I'll keep saying it as long as I need to: *Easter means so much more* if you've shared that last meal with Jesus, if you've stood in solidarity with Jesus as he is arrested and beaten and tried, if you've walked the Sorrowful Way with Jesus, if you've gone to the cross with Jesus, if you've accompanied his body to the tomb. If you've *felt the pain*. If you've *shed the tears*. If you come to Easter without walking that journey, you can rejoice; if you come to Easter *having* walked that journey, you will rejoice *even more*.

Today, Christ's final journey begins. On Friday, it reaches its climax. Walk this road with him.

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