

“Your King Is Coming!”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Matthew 21:1-11

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

March 29, 2026

Palm Sunday

Today we commemorate one of the most significant days in the life of Jesus: his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is one of a very few events that are told in all four Gospels. I want to consider three questions: (1) *What did Jesus do?* (2) *Why did Jesus do it?* (3) *What difference does it make to us today?*

First: *what did Jesus do?* Most of you probably know the basic answer. Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem. He was accompanied by a large crowd of followers. Some waved palm branches or laid them on the ground before him. Others threw their cloaks down in front of him. Many were shouting “Hosanna!” or “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Roman soldiers stood by, watching.

Let’s get a bit more specific. This event takes place in the springtime, shortly before the start of the annual Passover festival. That’s the festival when the Jewish people commemorate their dramatic escape from slavery in Egypt, a story that is told in the book of Exodus, chapters 11 to 15. In the story, God instructs each Israelite household to sacrifice a lamb, to put some of the lamb’s blood on the two doorposts and the lintel of their house, and to cook and eat the lamb that same night, “roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (Exodus 12:8). At midnight, God passes through the land of Egypt, striking down every firstborn in every household, *except* those houses that had been marked with the blood of the lambs. The Egyptian Pharaoh summons Moses and his brother Aaron and tells them to take the Israelite people and leave. Later, he changes his mind, and sends his horses and chariots after them. The Israelites find themselves trapped between Pharaoh’s army and a large body of water. God tells Moses to lift up his staff and raise his hand over the water. “The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.” (Exodus 14:21-22). The Egyptians follow in hot pursuit. Moses stretches out his hand one more time, “and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth.” The Egyptian army tries to flee, but it is too late; they are drown. The Israelites safely reach the far shore, and freedom. They rejoice in song.

That’s the story that gets told and retold every Passover. These days, Jews celebrate Passover in their homes, but in the time of Jesus, the expectation was that every able-bodied Jewish male would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to celebrate the Passover there. So there was always a very large influx of people into the city of Jerusalem every spring, in the days leading up to the Passover celebration.

Jesus and his followers were heading to Jerusalem to be in the city for the Passover festival. They had just come from the city of Jericho, down in the valley near the Jordan River. It’s about a 15-mile

journey from Jericho to Jerusalem, and it's mostly uphill; they would have ascended about 3,500 feet. There was a well-traveled road connecting the two cities, but it was not an easy walk! The very last hill they would have to climb before reaching Jerusalem was the Mount of Olives. They ascend from the town of Bethany to the town of Bethphage, which was pretty much right at the top of the Mount of Olives. Here is where Matthew picks up the story: "When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them."' " Matthew's version of the story includes two animals – a donkey *and* a colt – while the other Gospels only mention one. That's because Matthew understands this moment to be the fulfillment of a prophecy; I'll say more about that in a bit. The disciples do as Jesus bids; they bring the animals to Jesus and lay their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. Now – this is important! – they have just come some 14 miles, and it's been a long climb. Jesus *walked* all that way. Now, here he is, *right at the very top of the Mount of Olives*, and he suddenly feels the need to ride a donkey the rest of the way into Jerusalem, which was only about a mile away, mostly downhill. He was not riding this donkey because his legs were tired. He was riding the donkey because he wanted to make a *statement*. Riding that donkey *meant* something.

Matthew continues: "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'" The word "hosanna" is a plea for salvation. It literally means, "Save us!" Then Jesus enters Jerusalem. The other Gospels tell pretty much the same story, with some slight differences, the same way bystanders at *any* event would all describe the event slightly differently. Jesus rode a donkey (or a colt) triumphantly into Jerusalem, shortly before Passover, surrounded by a very large crowd of jubilant followers, who were simultaneously praising him and asking him for help.

This brings us to the second question: *why?* *Why* did Jesus do this? Jesus had been to Jerusalem many times before; every previous time, as far as we know, he walked. This time – the *final* time that he comes to the vicinity of Jerusalem – he rides a donkey (or a colt) the last mile of the journey, as he heads down the Mount of Olives, in full view of anybody who might be watching. *Why?*

There are two answers, and I've already alluded to both of them. The first, as Matthew makes clear, is that Jesus was *fulfilling an ancient prophecy*. Five or six hundred years earlier, the prophet Zechariah had said this: "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) In its original context, that prophecy had to do with the restoration of city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah, both of which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. By the time of Jesus, after the Jewish people had been living under foreign occupation for generations, that was one of many verses that gave them hope of a future Messiah who would come and rule as King. *Jesus would have known that prophecy*. Jesus would have known, when he stopped in Bethphage at the summit of the Mount of Olives to get a donkey and ride it the rest of the way to Jerusalem, that he was doing *precisely* what Zechariah had prophesied. Matthew even quotes the prophecy, now translated into Greek, to make sure we readers get the point: "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" Jesus is telling every Jew who is watching him: *I am that King you have been waiting for, for all these centuries*.

The second reason why Jesus did this: *to thumb his nose at Rome*. Make no mistake, Jesus was making a political statement here. The whole land was occupied by the Romans. They maintained a large military garrison right in the heart of Jerusalem, immediately adjacent to the Jewish temple. Every year, when Jewish pilgrims flocked to the city, the Roman presence would increase as well. Periodically, there were outbursts against the Romans, militant Jews who tried to start a revolt. That risk increased every time the number of Jews in Jerusalem swelled. More Jews in Jerusalem meant more Roman soldiers were needed to keep an eye on them. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, lived in a palace along the Mediterranean shoreline; ever Passover, he would travel to Jerusalem, with all of his retinue, in great pomp and circumstance, at least in part as a show of force. Some biblical scholars think Jesus arrived in Jerusalem *on the very same day* that Pilate also arrived. If that's true, there would have been *two* triumphal entries into Jerusalem happening more-or-less at the same time. One honored the Roman Governor and the entire Roman Empire. Consider it a military parade. And the other ... a rag-tag collection of people following an itinerant Jewish preacher. The Governor's military procession would, of course, have been *much* more grand. Scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan envision it like this: "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."¹ Meanwhile, on another side of the city, here comes Jesus, riding a donkey, surrounded by a motley bunch of ordinary people. Jesus's donkey would hardly have measured up to the Governor's horse-drawn chariot – but it didn't need to. He was conveying a message: *he's* the King. The king above *all* kings. It was a political statement as much as it was a religious statement. Yet as long as the crowds around Jesus didn't pose a threat – hardly any of them were armed! – the Romans could just laugh this off. *This* guy thinks he's a king? Our army could crush him and his followers in a matter of *minutes*. So Jesus is simultaneously telling the Jews, "I am the King you have been waiting for," *and* telling the Romans, "I may not look like much, but I am *far* more powerful than you. Your empire is *nothing*, compared to the Kingdom of God." Most of the Romans probably didn't get that message at all. *Some* of them would get it, later on.

So what difference does this story make for our lives today? A *huge* difference. We have some choices to make. Jesus was telling the world: "Here I am. I am the long-expected King of the Jews. I am *also* the King above all kings. I wield more power than *any* king, emperor, governor, president, or prime minister – indeed, more power than all of them put together. So: will you, or will you not, honor me as Lord? Will you, or will you not, *listen* to me? Will you, or will you not, submit *your* will to *my* will?"

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, put it like this: "You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God."²

What's it to be? *Who is Jesus to you?* If he's Lord ... *then let him be Lord*. In *all* of your life.

© 2026 Rev. Bill Pinches

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem* (Harper One, 2006), Chapter One: "Palm Sunday."

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952), Book Two, Chapter 3: "The Shocking Alternative."