

“When the Kingdom Comes, What Should It Look Like?”

Zechariah 9:9-10; John 12:12-19

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday in Lent, Palm Sunday 2022; April 10, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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The church year brings us around once again to the commemoration of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The redeeming events of Holy Week begin.

Jerusalem was full of people for Passover. A crowd went out from Jerusalem to meet Jesus as He was coming from Bethany. They took palm branches. They joined the crowd that was coming to Jerusalem with Jesus. They were all shouting: “Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD, the King of Israel” (John 12:12).

The crowd coming from Jerusalem went out to meet Jesus because they had heard about what He had done in bringing Lazarus back to life (John 12:17). Those who had seen Jesus bring Lazarus back to life were telling people in Jerusalem about it. They now heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. The King, the LORD of hosts, was coming to His city. What should it look like when He arrives?

John tells us what happened. We will also get help from the prophet Zechariah about this. Jesus found a donkey. He sat on it (John 12:14). He came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The crowd was waving palm branches. Jesus riding on a donkey was not going to strike much fear into Israel’s enemies. Waving palm branches wasn’t going to do so either.

The Romans who were occupying Jerusalem at the time were undoubtedly aware of the large crowd and commotion entering Jerusalem that day. They were undoubtedly watching. They would have observed Jesus riding on a donkey. They would have heard what was being chanted by the crowd about Him, about Him being the King, and all, who comes in the name of the LORD. It must have struck them as odd. Shouldn’t Jesus triumphal procession look more like a conquering Roman general entering Rome? Riding a chariot. Four impressive war horses pulling it. Representatives of the conquered peoples marching in front of him in chains. A retinue of soldiers on horses behind him. A show of force and conquering might. A show of all the glory of Rome. That or something very much like it is undoubtedly how the first conquering Roman general rode into Jerusalem when the Romans first conquered the City, with the soldiers armed with swords and spears.

But the crowd around Jesus consisted of regular folks of that day: townsfolk, farmers, craftsmen, shepherds, fishermen, men, women, and children, civilians. There were also tax collectors among them. They were not in chains. They were free of chains and full of joy. They were praising the One who had captured them, that is, captured their hearts.

For the more thoughtful Roman observers, it must have struck them as paradoxical, looking at Jesus and the crowd with Him. They were calling Him King, yet, He rides a donkey. They were calling Him King, yet, they wave palm branches; men, women, and children.

There were some Pharisees from Jerusalem who were also watching. In sourness and bitterness of spirit, in a pity-party, they say to one another: “Observe and take note that you are gaining nothing. The world has gone after him” (John 12:19). But it wasn’t the world going after Jesus. It was children of Israel who were doing so. It was people, and many of them longing for God’s fellowship.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day as Israel’s King and Lord in fulfillment of what the prophet Zechariah had said by the word of the LORD some five hundred years before: “Do not be

afraid, Daughter of Zion. Behold, your King comes to you seated upon a foal of a donkey” (John 12:15). He comes on a donkey. No need to be afraid. Rather, it is time for rejoicing.

Neither the Romans—let’s say as representatives of the nations, nor the Pharisees and other leaders of Israel, nor the people of Israel, probably realized the decisive turning point they were witnessing and participating in that day. The turning point had to do with the relationship of the kingdom of God to peoples and nations and kingdoms of this world; to the civil realm and law and authority. When Jesus came into Jerusalem not decked out in the implements of war surrounded by an army, likewise decked out, He was showing that the kingdom of God could no longer be identified with a particular ethnic group and nation and the civil state and authority, as it had been in Israel. No longer is the kingdom of God brought by power and force, and the threat of violence. This too was spoken of by Zechariah, the prophet: “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; And the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations” (Zech. 9:10 NASB).

What! Speak peace to the nations. Should not He speak war against the nations? Yet, Zechariah is saying by the word of the LORD what Isaiah had said a couple of hundred years earlier, which we read at Christmas: “[I]n that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10 NKJV). To do this, He had to come humble and riding on a donkey without being dressed in the pomp, show of power, and glory of the kingdoms of this world. There is no way Jesus could speak peace to the nations if He came to make war on them.

God sent His King to do something different than to conquer by military might. He sent Him to do what military might and civil law cannot do. He came to redeem, to win forgiveness, and to heal. He came to give the promise of life from the dead.

This too is shown in Zechariah. Joshua the high-priest was standing before the Angel of the LORD. Satan was also there accusing him. Joshua was standing there in filthy clothes (Zech. 3:1-3). Then the Angel of the LORD commanded that Joshua’s filthy garments be removed from him and that he be clothed in “festal robes” (Zech. 3:4).

Why? Why take the filthy robes off of him? Why put the festal robes on him? Why silence the accusations of Satan? Why, or maybe we should say, how? The Angel said, “Because I have taken away your iniquity” (Zech. 3:4). “I will remove the iniquity of the land in one day” (Zech. 3:9). As you claim Him as your refuge, you too are clothed in the “festal robes” of His righteousness and cleansing.

This is why the King came. The King came as King but also as priest to offer atoning sacrifice for sin. In another place in Zechariah, the Kingship and the high-priesthood were united (Zech. 6:12-13). The Messiah would occupy both offices.

He entered Jerusalem as King. He would offer Himself as atoning sacrifice a few days later as High Priest. He would offering Himself not only for the sins of the people of Israel, but for the sins of all human beings, for He shall be a banner for the nations, and in Him the Gentiles shall hope. He will speak peace to the nations in the name of the LORD. He Himself will be that peace.

I doubt the Pharisees who were despising Jesus that day were aware that Zechariah also spoke about them; that they would be the instruments in God’s hand of bringing about the atoning sacrifice their King and High priest would offer; though they had entirely different motives. They were the ones who handed Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion. Zechariah says, “They will look on Me, the LORD, whom they have pierced” (Zech. 12:10). He also says that they will weigh out thirty pieces of silver for the LORD’S wages (Zech. 11:12). The Pharisees of Jesus’ day from Jerusalem were living these words from Zechariah. They counted out thirty

pieces of silver to Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus, as the fee for betraying Jesus to them.

In these things they were fulfilling another thing Zechariah said: “Awake, O sword against My Shepherd, and against the man who is with Me, declares the LORD of hosts. Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered” (Zech. 13:7). Strike the King. Oh the Pharisees and the leaders of the people thought that they knew what they were doing with Jesus when they were getting rid of Him. But Jesus spoke truly of them, when He was being nailed to the cross. He said: “They know not what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). But God knew.

The King came as Priest to make atonement, to take away iniquity from before the LORD in one day. He has done it in the offering of Himself. So He speaks peace to all people in the LORD’S name. To do this He had to come riding on a donkey, humble. To do this He had to be lifted up on a cross, so He could draw all people to Himself, in His own words (John 12:32).

And so the Kingdom of God is made up of people gathered around good news and promise, humble confession of sin and the joy of receiving forgiveness. They are gathered around the promise of life and peace with God now, and eternally and completely in the world to come. Jesus’ Kingdom operates on a different principle than the kingdoms of this world: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). This is “the Spirit of grace and supplication” who directs us to the one whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10). In testimony to this One, whom they pierced, but whom God raised from the dead, the Spirit gives us faith in God’s goodness and mercy and rules in the heart through the proclamation of peace.

The Spirit’s rule looks like speaking the truth to one another in genuine pursuit of truth, not one’s own interests. It looks like not devising evil against one another in the heart, but practicing kindness and compassion with each other (Zech. 7:9-10); having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5).

It was a great day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey surrounded by people who would have looked like you and me, rejoicing. This was especially because He did not come in all the worldly pomp and show of conquering might, and not for that purpose. He came to redeem us and show us the way of forgiveness, humility, and peace. Because Jesus came riding on a donkey, you have the true hope and promise of peace with God in the forgiveness of sins and life from the dead. Amen.