

The Palm Sunday Challenge

John 12:12 & 13 say, *"The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the King of Israel!'"*

Almost everyone loves a party, and a lot of people were in a party mood when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem. Hopes and expectations were running high. And why not? Jesus' reputation as teacher, leader, healer, and miracle-worker had come before Him. Most recently, He was credited with raising Lazarus from the dead over in Bethany, less than two miles away. He had repeatedly demonstrated his intelligence and courage by standing up to the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders and being able to send them away with red ears, mumbling beneath their breath. Jesus was someone special, someone to be respected, someone who stood up for the underdog, someone to be reckoned with.

It was rumored that Jesus was the long-promised and long-hoped for Messiah. And, surely, the Messiah would set everything right. The Messiah would end the reign of foreign oppression and fear. The Messiah would send the occupying Roman army, governors, and tax collectors back to Rome where they belonged. The Messiah would bring in a new golden age in Israel that would never end. The Palm branches being waved on Palm Sunday, were symbols of Israel's desire for freedom & independence, as palm branches were embroidered into its flag the last time the nation was free. Passover was always stoked the people's fire for freedom. The appearance of Jesus added to that fire. It was a great day for a party.

To be sure, when the day broke and the parade began, it was a bit unusual. John 12:14-16 tell us: *"Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, 'Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.'" At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him."*

But, at the time, it was most unusual. It was unusual that the "Messiah," if that is who He was, should choose a lowly donkey for His battle steed. The army he brought with Him was a rag-tag lot of Galilean

fishermen, former tax collectors, zealots, and prostitutes. They were almost all from the lower classes and showed no signs of being trained for war.

But all of that could be forgiven; for perhaps, they reasoned, this parade was meant to be a show for the benefit of the enemy. Perhaps the mighty Messiah had a sense of humor and was poking fun at the mighty Romans. Perhaps He was declaring victory, making it clear that with the power of God behind Him, He would need no war horse or army to defeat Rome. The parade was like the stare-down at the beginning of a prize fight, a show of confidence that the Romans could be driven out with a mere donkey and a few children. Who needs human soldiers when the Messiah can call down fire from above and enlist the armies of heaven for His righteous cause?

The other possible explanation for His lowly appearance is precursor to the Cinderella story. Jesus has already proven Himself to be a great magician. John 12:17-18 say, *"Now the crowd that was with Him when He called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that He had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet Him."* Someone with the power to raise the dead can do great magic indeed. When the time was right surely He would raise His walking stick into the air and it would become a sword. The donkey He was riding would become the great white stallion. The motley crew that followed Him would become a fierce army the likes of which the world had never seen before. Ah, what a day! What suspense! What great expectations!

Even the Jewish leaders were impressed by the enthusiasm of the people who crowded around Jesus. John 12:19 says, *"So the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!'"*

Of course we now know that the crowds were way off base in their expectations. Jesus was not poking fun at anyone but genuinely declaring His humility and His mission of peace. And Jesus was not going to turn any pumpkins into chariots. There would be no magic, only the deep spiritual kind of magic that caused the Devil's plan to backfire in his face and the kind that would transform millions of human hearts. The people were right about one thing, however. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was good news. He had come to bring real life to all who

believed in Him. He had come to cast down the greatest enemy and

destroyer of human lives. He had come to bring freedom. The trouble was that it didn't come in the form they expected. It didn't seem to be what they wanted. It wasn't what they thought they needed. And, when Jesus didn't deliver what they expected, wanted, and thought they needed, they turned against Him. When His walking stick failed to turn into a sword and when the donkey remained a donkey, shouts of *"Hosanna, Blessed is the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!"* turned to shouts of *"Crucify Him!"* Oh how quickly the attitudes of people can change. A person can be viewed a hero one moment and a chump the next. It doesn't take much to change public opinion, especially for the worse.

But what does all of this have to do with us, these 2,018 or so Palm Sundays later? What's the real lesson that we need to learn? I believe what we need to learn is presented in the verses which follow the account of Jesus' parade into Jerusalem. John 12:20-23 say, *"Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. 'Sir,' they said, 'we would like to see Jesus.' Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'"*

Verses 20 and 21, draw our attention because they seem out of place in John's telling of the story. So far, the Gospel of John has been a Jewish story and a Jewish squabble. Jesus is a Jewish teacher, prophet, possible messiah, ministering to Jewish people and to a Samaritan woman, who was at least half Jewish. It is the Jewish Messiah who is expected and the Jewish priests and religious leaders who reject Jesus as that Messiah. And, right smack bam in the middle of all this Jewishness, John tells us that some Greeks ask Philip for an audience with Jesus.

We are caused to wonder, what's this all about? What are these non-Jewish foreigners doing at the end of the Palm Sunday parade? And, while some would suggest that Jesus ignores them because He has more important things to do, I don't think this is the case. In fact we can be quite confident that it is not the case because of what Jesus says next: Jesus says, in John 12:24: *"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."* Jesus means to die and to

offer Himself as a sacrifice for all the world. He had told them so back in John 10:16, where He had said, *"I have other sheep that are not of this*

sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." The truth is that Jesus came to be Savior of all people, Savior of all the world, Greeks included, you and me, included. Would you say, "**Hosanna!**" "**Blessed is He who comes**" "**in the name of the Lord!**"

Jesus is the Savior of the Jews, Savior of the Samaritans, Savior of the Greeks, Savior of us all. The Good News is meant for all people. Jesus brings hope, healing, forgiveness, freedom, joy, everlasting life, new beginnings for us all. And, we could have it all, except for the fact that we, like the first Palm Sunday participants, also want to have it all on our terms and in a way that will match our expectations.

Buddy Owens, Pastor, Artist, Singer, Christian author, son of Buck Owens, writes: "Far too often we come to God with specific expectations. We want to hear about a particular subject. We want to control the conversation. So we search the Scriptures looking for just the right verse to justify our preconceived position. Or we seek the counsel of one person after another until we finally hear what we want to hear. But that is not the way of a servant. . . . A servant listens to his master for the master's benefit, not his own."* Would you say that, "**A servant listens to his master**" "**for the master's benefit,**" "**not his own.**"

The purpose of the Messiah's coming is not ultimately for Him to be with us where we are but for us to be with Him where He is. He doesn't come just to make this a better world but to bring us into a better world. He doesn't come to help us find joy in ourselves; He comes that His joy may be in us. He doesn't come to fulfill our dreams; He comes that we might find our fulfillment in being embraced and consumed by His dream.

You see, He is not the only one who needs to die in order to be multiplied, and to be exalted. All who would crown Him Messiah King, must die to their own hopes, dreams, pain, fear, and expectations; we have to die to what we've been so we can be reborn into the persons God has truly created us to be. John 12:25 & 26 say, "*The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I*

5

am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."

The central message of Palm Sunday is that Jesus cannot save any of us until we crown Him King and Master of our lives. We must surrender our expectations, quit trying to save ourselves, and let go of the scraps of sin we so desperately want to hang on to, and humbly receive the new life He will give us. That's the only way it comes.

But there is another and most wondrous aspect to this I would have us also see this morning and that is this: The cross comes after the people rejected Jesus and not before. The cross came as a result of that rejection and from no other cause. Even so, the sacrifice offered on that cross is offered for those who rejected Him and for those who caused His pain.

Does God still love us when we are selfish? Say: "**Yes.**" Does God still love us when we hate Him for not meeting our expectations? Say: "**Yes.**" Does God still love us when we rebel against Him and insist on having our own way? Say: "**Yes.**" Will He forgive us if we change our attitude? Say: "**Yes.**" Will He even now give us peace, joy, true fulfillment, and everlasting life? Say: "**Yes.**" Will He force it on us if we reject His sacrifice for us on the cross? Say, "**No.**"

Palm Sunday is a great drama portraying the struggle between our will that condemns us to misery and self destruction, and God's provision in Christ that will save us from ourselves and set us free. The only question I have for each of us today is this: Have we surrendered? Will we surrender to the Lordship of the One who has come to set us free? Have you, will you, surrender?

*Buddy Owens, The Way of the Worshipper, Purpose Driven Publishing (2004)

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for March 25, 2018
The Palm Sunday Challenge

John 12:12-26

Jon R. Neely, Pastor
neelyjon@gmail.com
4thstcog.com