

THE COMING KINGDOM

Mark 11:1-10

First Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 3, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the First Sunday in Advent comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 11, verses 1 through 10. It is on page 717 of the pew Bible.

We typically think of this lesson in relation to Holy Week. It occurs on Palm Sunday. This is the event Palm Sunday is named for. And it occurs just a few days before Jesus is betrayed, arrested, beaten, and crucified. So we usually think of it in relation to Holy Week and the Passion of Christ, but it's also the typical lesson for the First Sunday in Advent.

Advent is a fancy Latin word that means "coming." During the season of Advent we prepare for the coming of our glorious God and King, Jesus Christ. So this lesson from Palm Sunday teaches us, at least in the case of his first coming, how Jesus comes to us. It's a fulfillment of what the prophet Zechariah wrote,

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech. 9:9)

Please stand as you are able for the gospel.

From Mark 11, beginning at verse 1,
we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.' " ⁴ And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. ⁵ And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. ⁷ And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. ⁹ And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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I want you to imagine a king. You can close your eyes if you need to. This is a great and powerful king. Picture him in your mind. What does he look like? What is he wearing?

Now picture him entering his royal city. He's returning from somewhere. He's been gone a long time. But now he is returning, and the people of the city are going out to meet him. Where is he coming from? Why was he gone so long? And how is he travelling? What is he riding?

And what are the people around him doing? Who is with the king? Is he travelling alone, or is someone with him? If so, who? And how do the people of the royal city respond to his presence? Picture the scene in your mind. And especially focus on the king. What does he look like?

If you closed your eyes you can open them again.

Since we just read the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, maybe you pictured that scene. If so, you probably envisioned something much different than the rest of us.

I picture a tall and strong king. He has a well-groomed beard with just enough gray hair to make him look wise. He has a symmetrical and handsome face, but with a slight scar to prove he's tough. He's wearing royal robes with a sword in a glimmering sheath at his side. He's coming home from a great war, but his robes are clean and bright and glorious.

He's riding a strong, white war horse. Perhaps your king is riding on an elephant or in a chariot or in one of those things the servants carry—I don't remember what they're called.

And he's followed by his army. They are all strong and dignified and orderly. Even the horses seem to be marching in unison. The sides of the road are lined with cheering crowds, but the soldiers are still dignified and stoic. They're certainly not angry, but none of them smile or even turn their gaze from straight ahead. Only the king has a subtle, satisfied smile, appropriate for the great victory he's accomplished. Occasionally he gives a slight nod to someone in the crowd. He's stately, dignified, and honored in every possible way.

Now this picture has some similarities to the account we just read from *The Gospel of Mark*. But there are some significant differences too.

Jesus is not coming home after winning some great battle for his kingdom. He's actually riding into his royal city in order to fight the battle there. And he's going to fight this battle in the strangest way possible—by surrendering himself to his opponents. He's going to win by losing. He's going to earn a crown that makes his head bleed. He's going to triumph by dying. He is even going to be exalted on a cross. It's such an odd strategy that his own disciples don't even see it coming. But he foreshadows it—just a little bit—by the manner in which he rides into his city.

We could say that Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem is an odd display of humility and glory, with a little more weight given to glory. But both are there, and they don't contradict each other.

It's glorious because it's a king riding into his royal city while his faithful praise him. This is glorious. But the sight was a little bit odd too, because Jesus was riding a donkey. Kings don't usually ride donkeys. And this wasn't any ordinary donkey. It was a colt—a *young* donkey.

Mark only mentions the colt, because that's the donkey Jesus rode, but Matthew tells us there were really two donkeys there—the colt and his mother. So there are these two donkeys—a full-size mommy donkey, who was probably pretty good at carrying things, and her colt, upon which no one had ever sat. And this colt was apparently still young enough that

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someone didn't want to separate him from his mommy. So you've got these two donkeys, and which one does the king of heaven and earth decide to ride? He picks the smaller one. This would have looked kind of strange—perhaps even humiliating for a king.

Donkeys are not majestic looking creatures. They're used for carrying things. And they can be used for carrying people, but people riding horses looks a lot more natural. Donkeys are not nearly as tall as horses, so it looks a little strange when people ride them. So your homework for the week is to google pictures of people riding donkeys. You'll see that when a small person rides a large donkey, it looks fairly normal. When an average person rides an average donkey, it looks a bit disproportional. But when a grown man rides a small donkey, it looks downright comical. Their toes almost touch the ground. It looks like the grown man should break the donkey, but he doesn't.

And this is what you would have seen if you were there outside Jerusalem that day to see Jesus ride into his royal city on a little donkey. We'd be tempted to say, "Quit horsing around and get on the big donkey." But Jesus picked the little one. Why?

Part of it is that the little donkey was a fulfillment of prophecy. Remember what Zechariah said five hundred years earlier:

Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
Humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9).

I kind of doubt everyone in the crowd recalled that passage when they saw this goofy sight. John says the disciples didn't even understand until later (John 12:16). But if anyone there did think of the prophecy from Zechariah, they would have understood that Jesus was proclaiming himself to be the Messiah King. And it kind of seems like someone must have understood this, because the crowds praise him, saying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (11:9-10) By riding the little donkey, Jesus was proclaiming himself to be the Messiah King who comes to fulfill the promises God made to King David.

So Jesus fulfills the prophecy, and he gives the people a sign to recognize him by. But there's more to it than that. There has to be. Why did the Holy Spirit inspire Zechariah to prophesy this way in the first place? The Holy Spirit could have prophesied anything. Why a donkey's colt? Why not a horse or an elephant? We don't have to think too hard to figure this out. The answer is right there in Zechariah's prophecy. It's because Jesus is a humble king:

Humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9).

Jesus is supposed to look different than other kings, because he is. The way he rules his kingdom is supposed to look strange, because it is completely different from how ordinary kings rule their kingdoms. He rules in humility. Sometimes he even rules by being humiliated.

Now there's a little bit of a difference between humility and humiliation. Humility is a virtue, and we like to see a little bit of it in our kings. We want our kings to be confident and strong, but a little bit of humility is nice too. It makes them more likeable. Now riding into town

on a little donkey is certainly a sign of humility. But Jesus didn't do this just for show. This act of humility was a foreshadowing of the *humiliation* he was about to endure.

And humiliation is not something we want to see in our kings. We want them to win the battle and still come home humble. We don't want to see them humiliated on the battlefield. But that is exactly what happened to Jesus.

He rides into Jerusalem because that is the place where he will fight the battle for the salvation of his people. And he fights this battle by surrendering himself to his enemies. And I don't mean the scribes and Pharisees. I'm talking about worse enemies. Jesus defeats sin, death, and the devil by succumbing to them. He wins by losing his own life.

Just like the Triumphal Entry, Jesus' innocent suffering and death is an odd display of humility and glory. The humility is easy to recognize. When he stands trial he makes no defense. He allows the soldiers to mock and beat him. He even prays for the people who are killing him. These are remarkable displays of humility.

But the scene goes far beyond simple humility to downright *humiliation*. He's stripped and tortured. He's condemned as a criminal and lifted up on a cross between two thieves. One of the criminals even mocks him. The bystanders shout insults at him as they watch him die. The whole thing is downright humiliating.

You would never guess, simply by observing the sight, that this is Jesus' finest hour. But it is. Cloaked behind this humiliating sight is Jesus in all his glory. The cross is really the pinnacle of Jesus' glory, because the cross is his act of salvation.

A savior's most glorious moment is always his saving action. When a firefighter runs into a burning building to save a small child, that's his finest hour. That's the pinnacle of his glory. There might be more applause and more people there to see it when he receives a commendation. But the saving action is his most glorious moment.

And so it is with Christ. Jesus' saving action is the height of his glory. So a condemned criminal, stripped and beaten, lifted up on a cross for people to ridicule as they watch him die—this is the glory of God. It certainly is an odd display of humility and glory.

It's probably not what we expect to see when we pray, "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Is. 64:1). We expect to see a powerful image of a king in battle, with enemy soldiers trembling at his presence. In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah paints the picture of the mountains quaking. Forget the fear God would inflict on enemy soldiers; the entire creation trembles when God rends the heavens and comes down.

But where do we see the mountains trembling? It's at the cross when God is dying. The cross is glorious and powerful, but it looks weak and humiliating instead. So why is this? It's because Jesus comes to deal with our sin.

About half of the Old Testament lesson is a picture of creation trembling when God rends the heavens and comes down to save his people. But the other half is a confession of sin.

Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

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There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.
But now, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people. (Is. 64:5b-9)

God's glorious salvation looks humiliating because the enemy he comes to defeat is not outside of us, but within us. So he comes with the gentleness of a surgeon, and he cuts out the cancer of sin. Then he goes a step further. He assumes our sin into his own body, and he lets it kill him in the most humiliating way possible—by dying the death of a criminal.

It's an odd display of humility and glory. Humiliating, because that's just the way it looks to the naked eye, but also glorious, because this is Jesus' saving action. And it's foreshadowed by this odd picture of a grown man riding a small donkey.

Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
Humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9).

Jesus comes to you humbly. On that Palm Sunday, he came to his royal city on a small donkey. At Christmas he came in the form of a humble child. Today he even comes to you in the ordinary forms of bread and wine.

He comes humbly, because your King comes to you with mercy, grace, forgiveness, life, and salvation.

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” (11:9-10)

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.