

Palm Sunday 2016 | The Triumphal Entry

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Date: 20 March 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Well, welcome to you. My name's Tommy, one of the pastors here. If we haven't met, I hope to meet you perhaps after the service. If you're just joining us at Advent, if this is your first time with us, you've come on a special day. It's a day that we call in the Christian calendar, the church year, Palm Sunday. And it's a day when we celebrate what you've been hearing about already in this service, what we call the triumphal entry, this climactic moment when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to a cheering crowd.

And there are a lot of aspects of the Bible that when we talk about them, once we talk about them, we may not come back to them for a while. But there are certain things that we come back to again and again and again, certain moments that we return to. And this is one of those moments. You have this incredible scene of Jesus as He's processing. People are lining the streets. They're waving palm branches in the air like some of us were doing. They're singing and they're celebrating. They're throwing the palm branches down on the ground. And at the end of our service, as we process out, we'll do that. As the cross goes, we'll throw our palm branches down. People also threw garments. You're welcome to do that if you would like.

And this was all a recognition that they saw Him as a kind of king, but not like any king the world has ever seen. It was an amazing spectacle. And one of the reasons we take time to remember this moment every year on this day is because it's a key moment, not only in the life of Jesus, but in history. You know, I give a lot of credit to the New Testament scholar Tom Wright, who's really helped expand my own understanding of everything that's happening at this moment.

Because you see, at this moment, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem, Wright says He's riding into the middle of a perfect storm. There's a converging of forces, agendas, in other words. And they form a perfect storm, as Wright says. It's a beautiful analogy. And Jesus rides right into the heart of it. There's the Roman agenda. There's the Jewish agenda. And then coming right into the middle of it is God's agenda. So we're going to look at each of these agendas, how they illuminate and help us understand this event. And then lastly, inevitably, we have to turn and take an honest look at our own personal agendas that we have brought here with us this evening. So the passage is Luke 19, 28 to 48.

Let's pray. Our Father, we do recognize that as we put on our garb and as we wave our palms and as we read these passages and as we sing the songs and pray the prayers and as we reenact this processional here in this building, that all of this would be meaningless if it were just us. Our great hope and great prayer is you are a God who is in the midst of us, who speaks to us. And so we pray, Lord, because we desperately need to hear that you would speak. And we pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.

[3 : 21] So first let me give you a little more context as to what's going on. We don't have things like this often in our culture. Pilgrims are steadily streaming into Jerusalem for the Passover feast. This is the great Jewish celebration of liberation. It remembered a time when Israel was enslaved to Egypt and when God, the mighty hand of God through Moses brought liberation. And so God liberated his people and gave them an identity. He formed them into a distinct people group. And so this story is much more than just good times in Israel's past. This was the core of their identity. This story shaped who you were as a Jewish person as a member of this people group. And so it's a very important festival with a lot of themes that are rich in people's minds. And at this time, Jesus had become a celebrity. He had performed enough miracles and gained enough notoriety that he could no longer travel in public. He had to travel in secret. And by this point, because of his celebrity, he had stopped moving around. And so rumors as to his whereabouts abounded, and everybody wanted to know, will Jesus be at the Passover?

And then word begins to spread that Jesus has been spotted in Bethany. That's like saying Jesus is in northern Virginia and he's headed this way. It's just right down the road. And Jesus had not too long ago raised Lazarus from the tomb. And so John's gospel tells us that people are coming to Bethany not just to see Jesus, but to see Lazarus. Is he really in fact alive again? So you can imagine all the inns and pubs and hotels and everything is absolutely booked solid. And everybody's buzzing about Jesus. So when Jesus comes out and people see him, and he sets out deliberately toward the city of Jerusalem, excitement begins to build. People begin to stir. You can imagine people running and telling their families, you know, busting the doors open, come on, come on, it's happening, it's happening, Jesus is here, come see. So they strike up the familiar song that brings back all of the memories, Psalm 118, a familiar pilgrim song to sing at this time of year, and yet they direct it at Jesus.

Blessed be the king, but not just any king, blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord. And you begin to see this sort of ad hoc royal procession ensues, Jesus riding in on a colt, people throwing their garments on the ground, creating this amazing scene.

And yet we have to wonder, did anyone there really understand the significance of this moment? I was in Boston in 2004 when the Red Sox won the World Series.

And for the first time in 86 years, the Sox pulled it off, and they did so with one of the greatest comebacks in baseball history. And I was there downtown in Boston at a quarter till midnight on October 27th when they won their final game against the St. Louis Cardinals 3 to nothing.

[6 : 46] And the city went absolutely ballistic. I mean, people went nuts. People were screaming and cheering and shouting in the streets. You know, all the cabs are laying on their horns, and you can hear horns and sirens all around the city, and people are celebrating in every window everywhere. It was bedlam. It was wonderful. It was this incredible celebration. And I was right in the middle of this crowd with my Red Sox hat on, and I was cheering with everyone. And the only problem was I'm not a baseball fan. That's why I never use sports illustrations in my sermons. I'm not a sports fan. I hate to admit it. I have to look this up to use it in a sermon. I'm like, what year was that again? Was that? Oh, 2004. And I'd write it down. But I was there, and I had my Sox hat on. And, you know, Dan and Josh are both baseball fans, but every time they start talking about baseball in the office, I just got to smile and nod and then walk away because I have no idea what they're talking about.

But I was there because it was exciting. I was there because there was an enormous amount of energy. I was there because my friends were there. I knew a few of the players' names, and I knew a few of the key games that had gotten them there. I knew it was a big deal, but I had no idea how big a deal until long afterwards. And I wonder how many people in this crowd would fit that description.

I think there were a lot of people like me that day. They're all thinking they understand Jesus and this entry, and yet they're missing it by miles. And I think this becomes clear as we look at each of the competing agendas. First, you have the Roman agenda. The Roman agenda. If you know your history, you know that up until recently, at this point in history, Rome had been a republic.

And then that had fallen apart because of Julius Caesar, his assassination that kicked off a long, bloody, awful civil war. And then after that civil war, his adopted son, Octavian, eventually rose to power, and Octavian named himself Augustus, which means majestic or worthy of honor. And then he began to tell people and to declare and to announce that his father, Julius, his adopted father, had actually been divine, which made him divine as well. And more specifically than that, it made him, if your father is God, then you are the son of God. So as Tom Wright says, the word went round the world, which Rome was quickly conquering. Good news, we have an emperor. The son of God has become the king of the world. No, that's not a unique statement. The son of God has become king. And so this began a line of Roman emperors who believed themselves to be divine sons of God, kings of the world. So their primary interest in Jesus is determining whether or not Jesus poses any threat to Roman authority.

Is Jesus just a local celebrity enjoying his five minutes of fame before the next person comes along? Or is he a threat? Is he a possible rebellion leader or a rival to Caesar or someone, in other words, who needed to be put down quickly and violently? So this is part of the reason in verse 39, everybody's cheering and the Pharisees say, Jesus, tell your disciples to be quiet. Because what are they saying? Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Well, there was only one king who came in the name of the Lord, and that was Caesar. So if anybody else claims to be king, and anybody is seen supporting that person, that's what? That's treason. So the Pharisees say, be quiet. You're going to get us all killed. So this is the Roman agenda. It's Caesar's agenda to stay in power, to keep the peace, and to make sure to crush any possible rebellion. So that's the Roman agenda. Now if we consider the

[11 : 12] Jewish agenda, it's very different. It's hard to imagine what it must have been like to be a Jew in this day and age. Imagine if from your earliest memories, from the time you were a toddler, you had been told that you were fortunate enough to be born into a special people group, a people group that God had come to and God had made a promise to, a people group who knew from their earliest days of existence that God had great plans and great things in store for them, that they had a a massively climactic destiny at the very heart of the future of the world. They occupied a special place right in the middle of it. And if your story again and again and again, and you knew your whole identity was wrapped up in the idea that God had delivered you again and again and again, miraculously delivering you, especially from Egypt. And this formed your hopes, it formed your dreams, it formed your fantasies, it formed your politics. And here you sit under the regime of a pagan government, of pagan rulers who blaspheme your God, who reject and mock you for your faith, who've established their own pantheon of gods, and who simply tolerate you as long as you pay your taxes. In all of your prophecies, when you go to church on Sunday, when you go to synagogue on Saturday, rather, your prophecies all talk about the time when God will again send his anointed king, this king greater even than David, to come and to set you free finally once and for all. And here you are at the Passover feast, the feast of liberation. And Jesus, who you've been hearing about for at least a couple of years now, Jesus chooses this time to have this climactic moment of entering into Jerusalem as a king. So how could you not think that this was the time when God's anointed Messiah was going to come and finally overthrow Rome? There's no way you couldn't think that. Even his disciples who had been with him begin jockeying for position. Okay, so when he finally, you know, raises his hand in lightning, nukes Caesar, and there's a smoking crater left, who's going to be in his cabinet when he takes over?

So what is Israel's agenda? If Rome's agenda is to stay in power, what is Israel's agenda? Make Israel great again.

Make Israel great again. Anytime you have people who feel weak, disenfranchised, angry, afraid, they long for a leader who will make them feel strong, who will vindicate them, who will show everybody else who's boss.

Make Israel great again. They're tired of feeling like that. And yet there are clues all along the way, clues that God has something altogether different in mind.

[14 : 41] The cult is an interesting detail. Some people say cult, some people say donkey. It was actually probably more likely a donkey. But the point being, this is not a horse befitting a conquering king.

It's a cult. And it recalls Zechariah 9 verse 9 and the ride of the humble, peacemaking Messiah. Not a warrior. It doesn't convey power and it doesn't convey strength.

It doesn't convey vindication. It doesn't convey we're going to show the world who's boss. It conveys humility and service. And then there's Jesus.

Amid all the shouts and cheers, all the singing and celebration, as Jesus draws near to Jerusalem, he's weeping.

The juxtaposition is so powerful. You can cut the tension with a knife. Cheering and singing and praising. And then the central figure is weeping.

[15 : 46] And the word actually conveys that he's audibly sobbing. He's bawling his eyes out. You know, we imagine the kind of Arian Jesus with a little tear. Imagine a Middle Eastern Jesus with tears pouring out of his eyes, audibly weeping.

He's come not to liberate Jerusalem but to declare its destruction. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side, tear you down to the ground.

You and your children within you and they will not leave one stone upon another. And of course, this is exactly what happened a little while later in A.D. 70. The Jews tried unsuccessfully to rebel.

The Romans sacked Jerusalem and they destroyed the temple and raised it to the ground. And this is why Jesus is weeping. And this is why Jesus is weeping. This is why he's bawling his eyes out and audibly sobbing is because of his deep, profound love for this city and these people, knowing that they have dug their own graves, knowing what is about to befall them.

He's weeping. And you ask, well, why is all this happening? And he gives us the answer, because you did not know the day of your visitation. You did not know the time of your visitation.

[17 : 11] They're so locked in their nationalism. They're so locked in their desire to be great again. They're so locked in their desire to show all their enemies that they cannot be threatened. They're so locked in their desire for vindication that they have completely lost sight of God's agenda.

They're blind to it. They'd forgotten that God actually wanted to use them to redeem and rescue the world. And they had lost sight of the even more important fact that they themselves, like Rome, had fallen under God's judgment.

And they were in need of redemption, and yet they're blind to it. So this is God's agenda, which overrules all other agendas. To the Romans who were wondering, is this a king?

Is he a threat to the throne? The clear answer from this moment, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, is yes. He is a king. And if you don't think there's political implications from this passage, we really need to read it again.

This is not just about having a private experience where Jesus becomes the king of the way I live my life, although that's a part of it.

[18 : 26] No, this is a declaration of kingship, but not just over Israel or Rome, but over all of creation. The Pharisees say, please tell your disciples to be quiet.

And what does Jesus say? Well, I tell you the truth. If they're silent, even the stones will cry out. Every grain of sand, every molecule recognizes their true king.

Except you. And yet to the Jews who want him to be their champion, who want him to be this mighty conqueror, he's equally challenging. He says to the Romans, yes, I'm a king.

Yes, your power is finite. Yes, your authority will come to an end. Yes, you are just a pretender on the throne. No, you are not divine. But he says to Israel, I'm not the conquering king you fantasize about and tell stories about.

I'm not the one who has come to crush your enemies. I'm the one who comes to be crushed by all of the enemies of God.

[19 : 28] He came on a cult in peace, not to defeat the bad guys, but to take all of the evil and hostility and rage of the world and absorb it into himself.

And holding it there and then dying. Extinguishing it. Emptying it. So this isn't about the liberation of one tiny nation state.

It's about the liberation of the world. So this week, we are embarking on a kind of journey. We are here on Palm Sunday, celebrating and remembering this moment, but there's more to the story.

We will move through the week, what we call Holy Week, and we will move to the evening we call Maundy Thursday, when we remember and celebrate Jesus' institution of the commandment to love one another and the washing of his disciples' feet.

We will move to Good Friday, when we recount the events of Jesus' crucifixion. We will move into Holy Saturday, a time of waiting, uncertainty, where God is dead.

[20 : 45] And then we will move to Sunday, when we announce together the great resurrection on the first Easter morning. And there's a whole story that we're embodying.

And so we ask, as we think about it at the outset of this week, how should we think about this time? What effect should this time have on us? I would suggest this. As we walk these last days with Jesus, that we should take the opportunity to honestly examine our own agendas.

Like Rome, do we see in our heart of hearts, Jesus as a threat to our power, our autonomy?

You know, perhaps some of us do, as long as we can think of him as a teacher or a moral example or an inspiring person or someone who gives great advice or maybe just even a religious myth, he poses no threat.

There's no response demanded of me. I'm simply meant to take his words and incorporate them into the advice journal of life. Perhaps like Israel, instead of rejecting him, we attempt to co-opt him into our personal agendas.

[21 : 58] We think, well, Jesus' real reason for being is to endorse my life plans, to endorse my career aspirations, to endorse my sense of timeline, my goals, my priorities.

And it's a good time to be honest. When I pray, do I pray, thy will be done, my king? Thy kingdom come. Or do we pray, I really hope that you will make it so that my will is done?

And so that my kingdom, which has come, can be maintained. I think people in every age have attempted to co-opt God to fit their agendas.

You know, you have this persistent American nationalism that believes that God has specially blessed the U.S. and that Jesus is, if ever he was on a side, he is on our side.

I look at what we do in the world. I look at the injustice that we're a part of. And I look at the fact that the church is flourishing, not here, but in places like China and Africa. And I have to question that.

[23 : 07] We have the kind of pervasiveness of the prosperity gospel. And you may not think of yourself as someone who believes in the prosperity gospel. But the idea that if I do this for you, God, and I sow these seeds of faith, and I act in these ways that are faithful to you, and I volunteer in these ways, then surely there's going to be a tit for tat.

And at some point, you're going to pay me back. And we know that we think that way because when God doesn't do what we want, do we still sing Psalm 118?

Do we still sing, blessed be God, blessed be King? Or is that only when God is doing what we want? There's a prevailing notion that God is love, what I heard somebody recently call the John Lennon Jesus, which I thought was kind of funny.

The idea that all we need is love. That Jesus is really just about love, and we can do anything we want as long as it's in the name of love. And it's interesting that although the Bible does say that God is love, it doesn't say that he is only love.

Because a God like that would never have been crucified. Jesus was crucified not because he claimed to be love, but because he claimed to be king. As we think about our agendas, as we think about how we approach Jesus, how we come to Jesus, how we perceive Jesus, and what we think it means to follow Jesus, we should remember that at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus said what?

[24 : 43] The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in me. You know, it's interesting. When I heard that for years, I thought, well, that just means that I need to look at Jesus, look at myself, feel bad for my sin, tell Jesus I'm sorry, and try to do better.

That's not what it means. Not fully what it means. Josephus was a first century Jewish writer and historian, and he talks about this phrase, repent and believe.

See, Josephus had gotten in good with the Roman leaders, and he saw other Jewish brothers who were amassing, planning a rebellion against Rome, and he knew that it was going to end in a bloodbath.

He knew that if his, that while he was attempting to choose diplomacy, he knew that his brothers and sisters were taking up arms, and he knew the power of Rome, and knew that if they did what they were planning to do, they would be slaughtered.

And so what does he do? He goes and he visits the leader of the rebels, and he talks to this leader about the futility of his plan. And what do you think he says, Josephus?

[25 : 54] Repent and believe. What does that mean? Let go of your nationalism. Let go of your identity. Let go of this plan to do what you think is necessary to fix the problems of the world.

It's not going to work. It's a dead end. Let it go. Abandon all of that and come and take my way and follow in my steps. I have a better plan, but in order to be a part of this plan, you have to let all of that go.

Jesus certainly meant more than that. He certainly was talking about sin. He certainly was talking about repentance in that way, but he did not mean less than that. And I believe he meant very much the same thing.

My kingdom is here. If you want to be a part of my kingdom, you have to let all of that go. Your identity, your nationalism, your agenda, your personal ambitions, your timeline, your priorities, let it all go.

You're either a part of my way or you're not. So the question this week, I believe that we can profit ourselves by asking honestly, are we blinded by our own agendas, or do we have the eyes to recognize the time of our visitation?

[27 : 10] Let's pray. Our heavenly father, we recognize that we need your power to take your word and drive it into our hearts.

And we ask that whatever is not of you would be stricken from memory. Whatever is from you would be embedded deeply in us. We pray this that we might leave our little paper crowns and many kingdoms and become a part of your great kingdom that is turning the world upside down.

We pray this for our good and your glory. In your son's name, amen.