

John 12:12-19

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[0:00] Father, we see all around us sorrow and suffering.! And I pray this morning you open our eyes to see you.

! Father, we hear all around us uncertainty and sorrow and anguish.! Would you open our ears to hear good news from your word.

And Father, our hearts are closed and hard because we are selfish. Would you soften them and open them up to receive Jesus and to be lit on fire in love to him.

We can't do any of this, so we pray your spirit does. In his name we pray. Amen. You can be seated. As you sit down, grab the Bible in front of you.

I'm going to be referencing both of our Bible readings, so it would be good to have it. And you can open to page 899. That's John chapter 12. And as you flip there, I'll just tell you, welcome back if you're on spring break.

[1:06] Let's look around the room and glare at the people who have tan skin. I have what's called the Thetis Island tan. I was with the youth for a work week at Pioneer Pacific on a nearby Gulf Island.

And that's why I now feel younger and full of vim and vigor. And it was a joy. We got to go together to Pioneer. That's one of our mission partners as a church. They run camps through the summer where children come and hear the gospel and have fun.

And we got to set up the camp. We did landscaping. We constructed stuff. We got to pull windows out of some of those cabins that look like they're about ready to fall over. We got to breathe new life.

And it was fun and beautiful. And who here was on that trip with me? Let's see a few hands. I see that hand. There were 20 of us in total. I think some of us are in bed recovering.

But for those of us here, well done. Gold star. One of the great things about going to Pioneer is it's a device-free space. It's wonderful. I saw like youth look me in the eyes last week.

[2:10] It was amazing. And because it's a device-free space, no global affairs. No world news. And so I don't know anything about anything.

And it was so lovely to come back and then so discouraging to catch up. And I wonder if you had to summarize the world today, our current cultural moment, global moment, in a single word.

What word would you choose? If you have a pen, you can write down your word in your bulletin.

What's the word that summarizes our current moment? The words I thought of, unstable, anxious, divided, expensive.

I imagine none of you in this room thought of the word peaceful or hopeful. When people are living through difficult times, and the world right now is in a difficult time, we often lift our eyes and we're looking for a leader who will come to us and act as our hero and will swoop in and save us.

You know, this is when new political careers start, when we're in the middle of a time of challenge. Because a new person comes and makes all these promises and we believe them and we go for it.

At the time of John chapter 12, God's people are living in really desperate times.

[3:40] Their country has been conquered and now they're ruled by a foreign superpower, Rome. It's the Passover holiday.

This is kind of the high watermark in the religious calendar. This is when God's people remember how God saved them from slavery in Egypt. God rescued his people and he delivered them to a land that he promised to them to be their home.

They remember it every year. Still, Jewish people remember the Passover. But in John chapter 12, God's people are living in a reality where the promised land has been captured.

And they're living under Roman occupation. And so for them, perhaps more acutely than for us, it's a time of uncertainty and oppression and violence and anxiety.

And so God's people are hoping for salvation. They're looking for a hero. They're waiting to be rescued like their ancestors in Egypt. They're praying for a deliverer.

[4:44] And word comes to the city that a man from King David's family line, who is saving people by performing miracles and acting out these signs and proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come to earth.

He's coming to Jerusalem. And so the whole city, it seems, empties out and goes out to meet him. And what they hear about this man is more than just, you know, doing some magic tricks on the side.

He's done something so unbelievable that eyewitnesses are pouring back from the little town of Bethany outside Jerusalem and won't stop talking about it. He has raised a man from death.

This guy, Lazarus, he was dead. People saw him die. He was buried. And yet Jesus called out for this man to arise. And he did. And the eyewitnesses have come back to Jerusalem.

They've given this report. And so now the whole city has gone out to meet Jesus. And so now to our text. John chapter 12, verse 12.

[5:50] We're told, the large crowd that had come to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover hears that Jesus is coming. And so they run out to meet him. And on their way, they grab something.

A symbol to represent who they think Jesus is and what he's coming to do. There are two symbols in our passage. And these two symbols will be the two points of my sermon.

And these two symbols represent two different narratives about what people are hoping for in Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. The first symbol is in verse 13.

And it's the symbol that that huge crowd has chosen to represent who they hope Jesus will be and what they hope he has come to do. And the second symbol is in verse 14.

And that's the symbol Jesus himself chooses to reveal his identity and why he has come. The first symbol in verse 13, very familiar, is a palm branch.

[6:51] The symbol chosen by the crowd to reflect their understanding of what's happening. So look at verse 13 of our passage. The Jerusalem crowd took palm branches. They went out to meet Jesus, crying out, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.

Now what we wouldn't understand, but 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem everyone understood, is to wave a palm branch in the first century was a subversive political action.

The palm branch was the Jewish symbol of national independence from foreign oppression. It was a sign of salvation, of freedom, of victory, of self-governance.

170 years before Jesus entered Jerusalem, there was a Jewish rebellion that succeeded in driving out the ruling foreign powers. They were Syrian Greeks 170 years before Jesus, not Romans.

And this war of independence was led by a man named Simon the Maccabee. And after his victory, he was installed as the Jewish king, sent to replace the oppressive foreign rule.

[8:02] And to celebrate his coronation, the Jewish crowds grabbed palm branches. And they waved them to mark that Greece is gone, and we are now in control of our own country.

So the palm branch was a symbol of independence and freedom. The palm branch became a symbol of free Jerusalem, a free nation. It was even put on their first century coins at the time. It was like a national flag. They didn't have flags back then, but they did have palm branches. A lot of them. So they'd grab them and they'd wave them. It was a symbol of support for the Jewish monarchy.

And therefore it was this defiant national symbol representing freedom from foreign rule. We've seen something really similar in the last few months in our world. Over the past few months, I've seen a new flag, a flag I'd never seen before, and I've seen more of it than maybe the Canadian flag.

It has three stripes on it, green on the top, white in the middle, red on the bottom. And right in the middle of the flag is a golden lion holding a saber with the sun rising behind it. I wasn't alive in the 70s, and so I've never seen this flag before.

[9:15] But it's everywhere. It's on cars, it's on t-shirts, people are wearing it like capes around the city. It's the old flag of the imperial state of Iran before the Islamic Revolution.

It's this political subversive symbol that represents a desire to see Iran return to how it was before the current regime took over the country in 1979.

So it's the old imperial flag. But that flag, if waved in Iran today, would probably get you killed.

Because it's a provocative anti-government symbol.

It's a symbol of revolution against the current Islamic rule. And in exactly the same way, the palm branch used in John 12 was a political symbol.

It represented national independence for Jewish people from foreign oppression. And as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, Jerusalem comes out to meet him, and they all are waving palm branches.

[10:13] And not just that, listen to what the crowd is saying. This is in verse 13 still. The crowd comes to Jesus and says, Hosanna. Hosanna means save us.

S-O-S. Hosanna. It's the cry of a desperate crowd for someone to come and deliver them.

Hosanna.

Save us. Do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The crowd is quoting Psalm 118. This is the psalm, the prayer, that was sung to pilgrims as they approached Jerusalem to enter the temple.

It's how the city of Jerusalem greeted her visitors when they came to worship God. They'd say the beginning of Psalm 118. But more than that, with palm branches in hand, coming out of the city to sing this to Jesus, had explicitly political overtones.

This crowd is praying that Jesus will save them. They are singing, praying, inviting him to bring them salvation. In their actions and their words, they're claiming that Jesus is the Messiah.

[11:24] He is God's chosen king, sent to set his people free. And we know this because the last thing they say in their prayer are the words, Even the king of Israel.

And those words are not found in Psalm 118. The crowd has added this last line to their song. So the crowd sees Jesus. And they exclaim, Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! And they add, even the king of Israel! The crowd sees Jesus as God's chosen king. As the one who is blessed.

As the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Who can save them from their current enslavement and oppression. And they see him coming at Passover. The ancient holiday that celebrates when God saved his people from oppression and enslavement under Egyptian masters.

And they think, perfect timing. Jesus now comes in the same way to save us from Rome. So all of this is represented by the palm branch. And when Jesus sees the crowd.

[12:36] Sees them waving the branches. And hears what they're saying. He responds in verse 14 with a completely different symbol. That reveals how Jesus interprets the significance of his arrival.

This is the second symbol, part two. Verse 14. Jesus found a young donkey. And sat on it. The second symbol in our story used to reveal who Jesus is.

And what he's come to do. Is a baby donkey. It's Jesus' chosen symbol to mark this day. And I think it's really interesting in church history. We've embraced the palm symbol.

We like the palm. This is Palm Sunday. All glory, laud, and honor. Right on, right on, and majesty. Right? We got Palm Sunday. No one calls today Donkey Sunday.

But we're going to start, right? No. When kings entered cities in Jesus' day, they could choose between one of two animals to ride.

[13:37] You could either choose a horse. They could choose a donkey. If you had those options, what would you choose? If you could ride to church today in a Ferrari or on a rusty pedal bike, what would you choose?

The horse, of course, was a symbol of power and of war. If a leader comes to your city riding a war horse, they've come to reveal themselves as a warrior and a conqueror.

A horse evokes fear and wealth and glory and power. A donkey represents none of those things.

If a king or an emperor rides into your city on a donkey, it means that they have come to show.

They come in peace. They are coming in lowliness.

In meekness. Obviously not to fight. It's a symbol of humility. When I was a kid in the neighborhood where I grew up in Kerrisdale, they had carnival days.

[14:38] And part of carnival days was free donkey and pony rides for children. My sister always wanted to go to the free rides, and I always didn't.

Because I remember seeing those animals marching along the train tracks, lumbering slowly, struggling to carry bored-looking children, and I thought, this is so lame.

I was embarrassed for the animal and for the little kid who had to ride it. This massive crowd, imagine they come out thinking, here's the king, this is it.

They're praying, screaming, Psalm 118 as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. And Jesus responds by choosing to ride a baby donkey. John, Jesus' biographer, who writes this account, explains that Jesus is doing this for a very particular purpose.

He's fulfilling a promise of God that God gave the ancient prophet Zechariah to proclaim to his people. And John quotes it in chapter 12, verse 15.

[15:43] Fear not, daughter of Zion. That means children of Jerusalem. Behold, look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

So both the symbols, the palm branch and the donkey, represent kingship. Both highlight that Jesus is God's chosen king, and he's come to save his people.

But just like the crowd add that line at the end of Psalm 118, even the king of Israel, our author John adds something that was not in Zechariah 9 when he quotes it.

If you were listening to our first reading this morning, you would have caught that. It's okay if you didn't. We're going to look at it now. Keep your finger in John 12 and flip back, I think, 100 pages to page 797 in your Bible that's open in front of you.

And if you read Zechariah 9, verse 9, it says, Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

[16:46] Keep your finger in Zechariah. Now flip back to John 12. The quote in John 12 replaces the first two words, rejoice greatly, with the words, fear not.

Why would John misquote or amend Zechariah's prophecy? In the Bible, the command to fear not, to not be afraid, is typically used when God himself or a messenger from God shows up in the story. It's the most common thing an angel says when they show up. First, fear not, for behold. There's the message. When God or God's word enters the narrative in the Bible, enters the story, often the first words spoken are fear not, do not be afraid.

So I think John is making a statement here. Jesus comes to Jerusalem and John inserts the words, fear not, into Zechariah's prophecy. It's as though John is trying to suggest that God himself has come to Jerusalem.

Remember how John begins his gospel back in John 1, verse 1. He says, in the beginning was the word, that's Jesus, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

[18:05] John begins his biography of Jesus by making this unbelievable assertion. Jesus is God. God has come to be with us and to save us.

And in John 12, our author adds the words, fear not, to highlight this reality. God has come to earth. And he comes to the capital riding a donkey.

And if a donkey is not humble enough, Jesus finds a baby donkey. It's a foal. A donkey that's never even been ridden before.

It's not even Jesus' donkey. It's a rental. It says, unimaginable humility. Almost embarrassingly understated.

Behold your king coming to you, sitting on a donkey's colt. If you keep reading Zechariah chapter 9, you see that the humility of this coming king is coupled with divine sovereignty.

[19:10] So if you kept your finger in Zechariah 9, listen to those two themes coming together. Humility and divinity. Verse 9. Behold your king is coming, righteous and having salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey.

Goes on to verse 10. He shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth.

Verse 14. Then the Lord will appear over them. And his arrow will go forth like lightning. The Lord God will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.

And lastly, verse 16. On that day, the Lord their God will save them. As the flock of his people. For like the jewels of a crown, they shall shine on his land.

For how great is his goodness and how great is his beauty. Humility and divinity found in this king. Fear not.

[20:16] God's king has come. Righteous and having salvation. He comes to bring peace. He comes to rule over the whole earth. The Lord will appear.

The Lord God will save. All of this encapsulated in the symbol of Jesus riding a donkey. It's a donkey Sunday, okay?

Let's rebrand. Let's do it. The crowd wanted a king who would defeat their enemies. We often want the same thing. But Jesus comes to bring peace.

Peace to the whole world. Peace to establish his reign and his rule over the entire world. Because he comes not merely to defeat Rome. But to defeat death.

It's the only gospel where the story of Lazarus is connected to the triumphal entry. He raised a man from death. And that's why the triumphal entry happened. He comes to free people.

[21:18] Not just from slavery to foreign overlords. But slavery to sin. He comes to us not just to defeat the current evil ruler or rulers of the earth. But to overcome the evil one.

And to end all evil forever. Jesus' mission is so much bigger than the crowd's agenda. He comes not for Jerusalem.

But for the whole world. Jesus comes to establish God's kingdom on earth. To rule as the king of the kingdom of heaven. A kingdom that's defined by no sin.

No darkness. No death. No sorrow. But instead full of God himself. And therefore full of light.

And life. And glory. And love. Jesus comes on a donkey in humility. But don't let that fool you. From seeing his sovereignty.

[22:18] All things are in his hands. His dominion is from sea to sea. As far as the east is from the west. But incredibly.

The way that Jesus is going to establish his rule. And defeat death. Is by submitting to it. Just a few days. Jesus will willingly allow himself to be killed.

In order to defeat death. He suffers to save us from our sin. By taking upon himself. The punishment we deserve. It is complete and utter foolishness to the world.

Our last rector said. No one would make this up. If you were creating a religion. This would not be the story you'd go with. It's foolishness.

But to us who are called Christians. Christ crucified is the power of God. And the wisdom of God. And the glory of God.

[23:21] And the love of God. On full display. The earliest known image we have portraying Jesus. Is some graffiti.

Scratched onto a stone in a wall in Rome. You can go see it at a museum in Rome. And it dates back to about 150 AD. Roughly four generations after Jesus triumphal entry. And the graffiti is of a man.

Standing on the side. With his arm raised. In worship. Towards another man. Who is being crucified. And the crucified man.

Has been given a donkey's head. It's the first image we have depicting Jesus. The crucified man is portrayed as a fool. An idiot.

Literally an ass. And the inscription scribbled below reads. Alex Amenos worships his God. The first portrayal we have of Jesus.

[24:20] Is as a crucified man with a donkey's head. A fool. And therefore the people who worship him. Like Alex Amenos. Are fools as well.

This week. This week. This holy week. We walk with Jesus. As he journeys to Jerusalem on a donkey. As he then goes willingly to his cross.

As he suffers death. And is buried. And then a week from today. We hear how he defeats death.

And brings peace to the whole world. As we follow after Jesus through holy week.

My prayer is that in him. You would see God. You would see he is God's chosen king. He has come in humility. But he also comes in power.

To reclaim the world. And to rule over it forever. My prayer also is that whatever word you chose. At the very beginning. To summarize our world today.

[25:18] You would now write a different word. In light of who Jesus is. And what he has done. Our current world is a mess. Just like the Middle East was a mess.

In Jesus' day. But despite that. My prayer is that you will fear not. Because if Jesus is God's chosen king. If he does indeed come to bring salvation.

And righteousness. And peace. And to establish his kingdom over the whole world. If he actually has defeated death. And taken away our sin. And made a way for us to be with God forever.

And given us his own Holy Spirit. Then that changes everything. Our current geopolitical issues. Are light and momentary troubles.

In light of the glorious reality. Of God's kingdom coming to earth. And overcoming all evil. For all eternity. In and through Christ. Blessed is he.

[26:14] Who comes in the name of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. Amen. Amen.