

# The Unexpected King

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. It's good to see you all this morning. Well, it's the Sunday before Easter. As John mentioned, this is what we typically call Palm Sunday. This is the day that we remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And this is the start of what we often call, this is the start of what we often call Holy Week, this week leading up to and including Jesus' death and resurrection. Again, as John mentioned, we'll have a Good Friday service later this week at 6.30, and then next Sunday, of course, our Easter service.

And this time of year, we usually pause from our normal preaching series, and we focus in again on these critical and central events in Jesus' life. Every year we pause and we celebrate and we meditate directly on Jesus' work because that's what Christianity is all about. Not ultimately what we do, but what Jesus has done, and not ultimately who we are, but who Jesus is. So Holy Week is a bit like a kind of massive spiritual recalibration. You know, we go through the year and we get distracted or we get weary or maybe things are going great and we get forgetful, but then Holy Week comes again and we get to come back to what's ultimately important, the center and the source and the goal of everything, the person and work of Jesus. So if you're here this morning and you're feeling a bit off-center or a bit distracted or a bit weary, or maybe you're here and you're spiritually searching or you're spiritually hungry, wanting something that's spiritually real for a change, well then, you've come on a good Sunday. Maybe this Holy Week will be a turning point for you, a spiritual renewal through God's Spirit as we consider the Lord Jesus together.

Father, now in our services during Holy Week this year, we'll be looking at John's gospel together. And today, on this Palm Sunday, we begin in John chapter 12, verse 12. That's page 845 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn there. We'll have it on the screens too. John chapter 12, picking up in verse 12, page 845. Let me pray and then I'll read for us. Let's pray. Father, we ask for your Spirit to come.

As we attend to your word together. Like some of the Greek in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we say with them, we wish to see Jesus, not just with merely human eyes, but with the eyes of faith.

Grant that, Father, that we might glorify you in your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen. All right, John 12, picking up in verse 12. The next day, the large crowd that had come to the feast, that is the feast of Passover, heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel. And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, fear not, daughter of Zion. Behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

[ 3 : 18 ] His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.

So the Pharisees said to one another, you see that you're gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him. All right, now, you know, perhaps one of the most basic, one of the most basic confessions at the heart of Christianity is that Jesus of Nazareth is King. He's the King. Think of how the Apostles' Creed begins. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ.

Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord. And remember what the word Christ means, right? Christ isn't Jesus's last name. It wasn't as if Mary and Joseph Christ had a baby and they called him Jesus, right?

No, Christ is a title, right? It's Greek for the anointed one, the Hebrew word being the Messiah, which is to say the long-awaited King. Jesus is Israel's King and the world's true Lord. We might put

the first, you know, we might put the Apostles' Creed this way. We believe in King Jesus, the Father's only begotten Son, our Lord. This is basic. It's a Christian faith. Jesus is King. And at the heart of this event that we call the triumphal entry is a proclamation of Jesus's kingship. After all, that's what the crowds in John 12 are saying in both deed and in word in verses 12 and 13. [ 4 : 56 ] They go out to greet Jesus waving palm branches, which is why we call this Sunday before Easter Palm Sunday. And palm branches had become, by the first century, sort of a symbol of the Jewish nation.

That's what they're saying. Back in 141 BC, when Simon the Maccabee, he was sort of a Jewish hero, drove the Syrian forces out of the Jerusalem citadel. He was praised with music and with the waving of palm branches. So this becomes sort of a symbol of the Jewish nation, a victory.

So when the pilgrims in Jerusalem come out waving palm branches, it's a bit like a Fourth of July parade and everyone's sort of waving a national flag. Except for the Jewish people in the first century, under Roman occupation, it was even more charged with emotion. They were basically declaring their nationalist hope that a messianic liberator was here on the scene.

The king is here to save us, to set us free. And that's what they're literally saying with their words at the end of verse 3, Hosanna, which means save us. And it becomes sort of this expression of praise. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. That comes from Psalm 118.25, a psalm that's used often in Jewish worship. And then the crowd adds, as if we were missing the point, the king of Israel.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. That is the king of Israel. So they're praising Jesus as the Messiah, as the king. And you know, the crowds aren't wrong.

[ 6 : 27 ] As Christians, we too celebrate the kingship of Jesus. We get excited about it, and we sing about it. To become a Christian means to take Jesus as your rightful king, to praise him, to trust him, to obey him. The crowds were not wrong. But they weren't totally right either.

They didn't fully understand the true nature of Jesus's kingship. Look at verses 17 and 18. Some of them had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead.

Others had heard them tell about it. So on the basis of that miraculous sign, they were all ready to herald Jesus as king. But Jesus wasn't necessarily the kind of king that they were expecting. They didn't fully understand the nature of Jesus's kingship. And often, you know, neither do we. The crowds that day wanted a political, a military king.

But how about us? What sort of king do you want or expect Jesus to be? History is strewn with examples of peoples and nations trying to squeeze Jesus's kingship into their own agenda. You know, the social gospel of the 19th century said that Jesus was sort of the king of social reform. The prosperity gospel of today tells us that Jesus is...he's the king of material blessings. Like the crowds back then, you know, some of us begin to consider Christ because maybe we've heard about some of the great things that he's done. Maybe you've seen the changes in your friend or your spouse now that they've become Christians. And you're curious, maybe even hopeful, that he can do something powerful in your life too. And he can indeed. But the kingship of Jesus can't be squeezed into our agenda. We have to let him show us what sort of king he is. And thankfully, he does just that. The rest of our passage shows us just what sort of unexpected king Jesus is.

And we can look at it in four ways. And this is how we'll spend the rest of our time together looking at this passage. We see here that Jesus is a humble king, and he's a veiled king. He's a divisive king, and he's a universal king. Humble, veiled, divisive, and universal. Okay, let's look first at Jesus is a humble king. In verses 14 through 15, Jesus responds to the crowds. They're praising him as king, and what does he do? He responds by getting a young donkey and riding it into the city.

[ 9 : 08 ] And in doing that, he's sort of doing two things at once. First, Jesus is affirming that he is Israel's king because Jesus is deliberately, consciously fulfilling the 500-year-old prophecy of Zechariah that we read earlier in the service. John quotes it here, Behold, your king is coming. And Jesus says, Yes, it's true. I'm here.

But second, in that same act, he's reframing what sort of king he's come to be. Zechariah spoke of a king sitting and riding into Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on a donkey.

Just the other day, we were driving around somewhere in Connecticut. I don't even remember where it was. And we drove by a farm, and they had a donkey there. When's the last time you've actually seen a donkey? Right? They're sort of, they're cute. They're sort of silly. You know, they were kind of work animals in the first century. Not exactly what you expect, like, your great military leader to come riding in on, right? See, your king comes to you, Zechariah said, lowly or humble

and riding on a donkey. It's as if Jesus is saying, Yes, I am the king, but not the king you've been expecting. You want a military general. You want an insurrection.

You want a war horse. But that's not what my kingdom's about. I'm coming on a donkey. You see, the nature of Jesus's kingship, the nature of Jesus's authority, the nature of how Jesus wields his power is utterly different than the world's way. Jesus doesn't wield his authority to dominate, to oppress, to strike down. He's come to serve and make peace.

So as followers of Jesus, as members of his kingdom, under his kingship, should we not strive to be the same? You know, most of us have some sort of authority or influence or power. You know, some of us have some type of influence in our relationships, in the different spheres of life God has put us in.

[11:09] How do you use that influence, that authority? In the workplace, do you use your position among your co-workers to simply get ahead and succeed for yourself? Or are you using your influence and authority to help others flourish as well? Parents, how do you use the position, the influence, the authority you have with your kids? Of course, kids need structure and correction and loving discipline. But how do you go about it? Are you gentle or are you harsh?

I get it. There are some times when you just want to ride in on the war horse, you know, when your kids are misbehaving or whatever, right? But that isn't the way of Christ. How about in the church? Elders, deacons, small group leaders, teachers, leaders of various kinds, you too have been entrusted with influence, with authority. How are you using it? To be served or to serve? Jesus was a humble king. He had all authority in heaven and on earth, and yet he emptied himself and came as a servant to bring peace. The crowds were ready that day for a fight, for an insurrection. At the Passover, hundreds of thousands would have been gathered, and Jesus could have whipped up their frenzy in a second, but he was a completely unexpected kind of king. He was a humble king.

But we see here that Jesus was also a veiled king. Look again at verse 16. His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. Now, this isn't the first time in John's gospel that the disciples don't fully understand the significance of what Jesus is doing. John will make a similar comment when Jesus cleanses the temple. The disciples wouldn't understand Jesus' words about destroying the temple and raising it up in three days until after he was raised from the dead. The same thing's happening here. The disciples are watching Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey of all things, and they don't get it. You can imagine them kind of looking at each other, thinking, you know, Jesus, we could have upgraded that donkey for you. This would have been really easy. You know, I don't think that thing is going to intimidate the Romans. We could go get you a horse. We could go get you a sword. What do you need, right? In other words, Jesus, what Jesus is up to in this moment is veiled. It's covered. It's misunderstood. The actions of the Messiah, of King Jesus, in this world are so often veiled and hard to understand with our natural eyes.

[13:57] But what is it that pulls the veil away? When do the scales sort of fall off the disciples' eyes? When does the penny drop for them? John says, when Jesus was glorified. That is, after Jesus' death and resurrection, then it made sense. The donkey makes sense when you realize that Jesus, the King, was riding into Jerusalem to fight a greater battle than the crowds and the disciples could ever imagine. The Romans were a problem, yes. No doubt about that. But Jesus had come to fight the problem under every problem. And the problem under every problem are the dark forces of sin and death.

And the only way to defeat sin and death once and for all was for the King to lay down his life for his subjects. He would humble himself to death on a Roman cross, paying sin's penalty. Three days later, he would be raised, conquering death and offering forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who believe. The cross makes it clear. Think about your own life. Think about that in your own life. You know, if you're here and you're kind of even maybe researching different religions or you're spiritually searching, you know, you should know, friend, that Christianity does not make sense apart from the cross of King Jesus. Maybe there are some things about Jesus that you admire. You like some of his teachings. You're attracted by the idea of a humble king who's come to serve and make peace. But you know, you won't really get Jesus apart from the cross. Because if you see Jesus just as a good moral teacher, a sort of good example to follow, then you can try to be humble like him.

You can try to be a peacemaker like him. But so often you will fall short. We all do. And then what? Well, you might think then that you've sort of tried Christianity and it didn't work.

[16:07] You've tried the kind of humble servant thing and now you're just ready for something else. But you see, friend, that would be a Christ without the cross. Jesus didn't come just to tell you what to do or to give you a moral example.

He came to do something you could not do in your place, out of love, so you could be reconciled to God. Jesus is a veiled king, but the cross makes it clear.

And this is true for believers as well. You know, sometimes we don't understand what Jesus is up to in our lives. Sometimes we have a hard time understanding why Jesus in his word commands us to live in certain ways. You know, he says crazy things. Forgive your enemies. Practice radical generosity. Don't sleep with anyone outside of marriage. You know, taken on their own, these commands of Jesus, they seem crushing. But the cross makes it clear. Jesus laid down his life to take it up again and offer us new life. So as we lay down our lives, we know that the way of the cross is the way that leads to the crown. The hardships we face, the battles we endure, we do so with a king who carried the cross for us. So that any cross we bear, he bears with us.

There's a 17th century Scottish pastor named Samuel Rutherford, and I want to read for you what he wrote in one of his letters that speaks to this. He says, the weightiest end of the cross of Christ that is laid upon you lieth upon your strong Savior. Do you see the point? He's saying that there's a cross that we bear as believers, but the heaviest part of it is being born by Jesus.

Rutherford goes on, he says, for Isaiah said that in all your afflictions he is afflicted. Oh, blessed second Adam who suffers with you, and glad may your soul be even to walk in the fiery furnace with one like unto the Son of Man, who is also the Son of God. Courage up your heart.

[18:21] When you tire, he will bear both you and your burden. Yet a little while, and you shall see the salvation of God. Friends, Jesus often is a veiled king, but yet a little while, and you shall see the salvation of God. The third thing we see here is that Jesus isn't just a humble king, and he isn't just a veiled king, but he's also a divisive king. We see in the last few verses of our text that whereas the crowds and the disciples are praising Jesus, the Pharisees continue to reject him. The Pharisees see the crowds, and they're just greatly put out. Now, the Pharisees were sort of, they were kind of less accommodating to the Roman occupation than the Sadducees. The Sadducees were the sort of temple elites who cooperated with the Romans, and they've sort of already decided that they're going to find a way to kill Jesus. But, you know, the Romans weren't sort of that, the Pharisees, excuse me, weren't sort of that cooperative with the Romans. You know, they thought the path of wisdom was to just sort of endure occupation. But you can see here how they chafe under their perception of Jesus's rising popularity. Jesus seems to be going from strength to strength, and the political stability becomes more and more fragile, and they say in frustration, this is getting us nowhere. Jesus is such a divisive king at times. Some accept, some reject.

And of course, as the story of the Passion continues, we see that even these crowds don't remain loyal for long. When their king chooses the way of the cross, many in these crowds will turn and leave him.

Even the disciples abandon him. Jesus had come to bring peace, but there's no getting around the narrowness of his way. Not everyone will accept him. He will be divisive.

And that's still true today, isn't it? Some of you have felt this divisive nature of Jesus's kingship, maybe in your own families. Some of you maybe have lost friends because of your allegiance to him. I know I have. So I think it's good to remember this kind of divisive nature of Jesus's kingship, so we aren't surprised or taken aback when it happens.

And you know, the reality is, there is no neutrality when it comes to Jesus. We can't simply say, yeah, you know, Jesus is okay. He's okay. No, friends, Jesus claims to be the king.

[20:53] The king of your life and mine. We can reject that claim or we can accept it, but at the end of the day, there's really no middle way. Each of us must decide. You know, many people reject Christianity on the surface because of maybe some of its ethical claims or because it claims to be the only way, the only true way to know God. Some people will reject it for some of those things, but don't you see underneath all of that is really a rejection of Jesus as king. At the end of the day, Jesus is the stumbling block. If he is the risen king, then he has the right to our obedience, our love, and our trust.

But if he isn't the risen king, then who cares what Jesus says about ethics or knowing God or any of those things? Jesus is the dividing line. Who do you say he is? That's the most important question.

But Jesus isn't just a divisive king. He is, at the same time, the universal king. At the end of our passage, the Pharisees say in disgust, look, the whole world has gone after him. And this is one of those many moments in John's gospel of deep irony when the characters speak so much better than they know. And here, what the Pharisees say in disgust is, friends, a wonderful, beautiful gospel truth. This unexpectedly humble, veiled, divisive king is the universal king.

The whole world indeed has gone after him. What began in Jerusalem spread through Judea, into Samaria, and kept growing to the ends of the earth. And now, friends, everywhere, people of nearly every culture and nation and language claim Jesus as their king. Why? Because he is who he said he is, our loving Lord. His death really did forgive sins. His resurrection really did break death's bars.

[ 23 : 03 ] In his ascension, he really did pour out his spirit at Pentecost. The gospel of Jesus Christ really is good news. And it's good news for everyone who believes. You know, this is what was and still is radical about Christianity. It's for all people. It's not just for one culture. It's not just for one race or ethnicity.

It's not just for one class. What Jesus did, he did for all who trust in him. Zacharias saw this all the way back 500 years before Christ when he said, he will proclaim peace to the nations. It's for all people.

And today, friends, he proclaims peace to you. So trust in him. Jesus is the universal king. And that means as a church, we're going to exalt the cross and exalt the kingship of Jesus above and before everything else. And when we lift him up, then he draws all people to himself. Around the cross, we're united across race and gender and class because before the cross of King Jesus, we're all humbled and we're all exalted. Jesus is a universal king.

And that means as a church, we're going to pray for our civic leaders because we're commanded to, but ultimately our allegiance doesn't belong to any political party or public policy. Yes, we work for the common good. We believe in common grace, but Jesus is our king.

It's okay and good to love your city or to love your home country, but ultimately Jesus is our king and he holds our allegiance before anything else. Friends, this is our unexpected king.

[ 24 : 51 ] Humble, misunderstood, divisive, and yet the universal king of all. And if we follow this unexpected king, then we will surely become a very unexpected people.

We will be humble, and at times we will be misunderstood. There are times when we'll be divisive, and yet at the same time we'll be for all people.

How about you, friend? Are you ready to join this unexpected king and become a part of his unexpected kingdom? Let's pray together.

Father in heaven, as we take just a moment of quiet now, having meditated on this passage, Lord, we pray that you would help us again to set apart Christ the Lord as holy in our hearts.

Lord, if there are areas where we've been holding back from really giving him lordship in our lives, we pray that by your spirit you would come and help us to see how loving and gentle and good Christ is.

[ 26 : 10 ] And that to follow him in obedience surely must be for our good given how much he loves us. Lord, I pray for any here who are still considering these claims of Christ.

Lord, it's a weighty thing we acknowledge to think about handing your life over to you, King Jesus. So we pray that by your spirit you would continue to work in the hearts of those who are seeking, open their eyes to you, grant them saving faith.

Be exalted in our midst, King Jesus, we pray. Amen.