

The Sixth Sunday in Lent — Sunday of the Passion

March 25, 2018

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

Luke 19:28-40 After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 30 “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

32 Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. **33** As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

34 They replied, “The Lord needs it.”

35 They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. **36** As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

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“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

40 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

“Embrace Your Underdog King”

This year’s NCAA men’s basketball tournament is perfect if you are the kind of person who loves upsets. But no one really expects a 16 seed to upset a number 1 seed. It only took the first weekend to destroy absolutely every bracket in existence. When you realize how many deserving teams didn’t make it in, you can understand how each team in the tournament is happy just to have made it in. Every underdog will say they expect to win. They aren’t just satisfied with showing up. Getting in isn’t enough. But then when they actually pull off the upset, they find themselves in an unfamiliar, possibly unexpected position. What is the next move for the underdog who accomplishes a big upset?

Jesus has a different kind of upset in mind on Palm Sunday. The stakes are much higher than any basketball tournament. Some might have considered him the favorite as he came nearer to Jerusalem. But his coming, the way he comes and what he actually accomplishes is a serious surprise. And yet, no matter what kind of underdog we consider him to be, Jesus is the underdog King you can embrace.

Interestingly, this account is included in all four of the Gospels. It’s not just important in the life of Jesus, it’s foundational for what comes next. On Friday Jesus and his followers went from the 800 feet below sea level of Jericho to just on the outskirts of Jerusalem at over 2,000 feet above sea level. They rested on the Sabbath

with friends there in Bethany. Now they are making the final trek into Jerusalem. Things are about to go crazy.

From Bethany their rugged trek toward Jerusalem would take them over the heights of the Mount of Olives. The road from the Mount of Olives descends deep into the Kidron Valley and then goes back up into Jerusalem. But from the scenic viewpoint on the Mount of Olives situated 300 feet above Jerusalem, Jesus would have a magnificent view of his final destination. His ultimate destination. That's where he decides to stop walking and start riding. That's when joyous followers trailing behind Jesus join forces with joyous throngs coming out to greet Jesus from Jerusalem. It's like fans converging from every direction to storm the court after a Cinderella upsets the favored opponent on a last second shot.

It's clear to any observers what the crowds think of Jesus. Stripping off their long outer robes, they create a royal carpet to greet this widely endorsed VIP. Their praises make their expectations unambiguous: **"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"** (Luke 19:38) The One who Comes became an title attached to the promised Messiah. Their praises show they view him as the great and long-expected Messiah-King. We get just a sampling of their spontaneous joy: **"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"** (Luke 18:38)

Religious elites may view him as an outsider. Political powers may see him as a pretender. To these crowds though, Jesus is legit. He is right where he belongs. They belong with Jesus. If he's an underdog, he's their underdog. They are assembled around a champion. He is going to bring them victory.

Their joy is genuine. Enthusiasm is holy. It's a wave of worship based on Jesus' real power put on display: **"the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen."** (Luke 19:37) Real royal welcome and spontaneous submission are based on real evidence. And yet, there is a lot of baggage wrapped up in those shouts of praise.

Jesus seems like the kind of underdog we could get behind. We can cheer for someone who upsets the favorite. We get excited by someone who shakes things up. But how long will this underdog hold our allegiance and attention? Will he provide the royal power I'm missing in my life? Will he be able to provide real victories in my relationships? I can get excited about some upsets, but they never seem to last. When I'm after more than mere entertainment, how long before this underdog starts to disappoint me?

After all, we are disappointed when we hear political campaigns target specific people when they gather specific personal information about us. We get freaked out when ads pop up on our web browsers that are a little too specific to something we've just been searching for. We so often go from one extreme to the other. Boastfully bragging about our side one minute, muttering is exasperation the next. And Jesus never makes any promises. We just heap all our expectations onto him. We

come up with our dreams of transformed lives and load them onto Jesus. We produce visions of glory and success and expect Jesus to come through.

Jesus meets and accepts those Messianic expectations of the crowds. Jesus knows he's not the king of their dreams. He understands he has no answer to match their political and national hopes. He knows what they are saying. He accepts their praise. And yet Jesus is prepared to redefine their understanding of who the Messiah is and what kind of King he should be in the days ahead.

For you, for me, for those crowds on the outskirts of Jerusalem 2,000 year ago, Jesus brings unexpected greatness of the underdog King. Jesus accepts their honor and soaks up their praises even though he comes to be a different kind of king. He comes in meekness and humility instead of majesty and might.

Did they even really understand what they were saying about Jesus? Jesus did, even if they didn't. Jesus comes into Jerusalem on the day the Passover lamb would be selected. He enters when a victim is chosen for slaughter. He comes among them when they embrace a substitute to spare them from judgment and destruction. After all, Jesus really is who they say he is.

Jesus just comes into Jerusalem with unexpected greatness. He's there to do more than make an impressive run. He has something more substantial in mind than to capture the imagination of crowds for a few days. The otherworldly King comes to launch a kingdom of humility and peace. Jesus pushes forward even though he understands the fickle nature of mob mentality, the shifting allegiances of fans cheering for an underdog.

The greatness of this underdog King isn't found in the number of people who really believe in him or how powerfully any of his real fans believe he can pull off the upset. His greatness is found in his lowliness. He comes on a colt instead of a majestic stallion. He comes in meekness instead of might. He comes to bring peace instead of overthrowing the rulers and authorities.

In just over a week, a new champion will be crowned for college basketball. No matter what the reshuffled brackets predict now, there will be no 16 seed hoisting a trophy. Christ Jesus came into Jerusalem as the ultimate underdog. God sees his people with their expectations. He understands their real needs. He sees deeper into their true and more devastating distress. You and I and everyone in that crowd needs a champion to overcome sin, struggle against Satan, and defeat death. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey to the shouts of crowds to bring unexpected grace. He demonstrated his great might by defeating death and sin at the cross. He establishes a permanent kingdom of peace in human hearts today through his good news message. Peace comes to heaven because humanity is brought back into harmony with God. Peace comes only through the arrival of the Messiah. Embrace your underdog who brings victory when he seems to surrender. Embrace your hero

who enters into the realm of death to conquer death. Jesus comes to rescue his people. Embrace your underdog King. Amen.