

## Sixth Sunday in Lent - Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Matthew 21:1-11** As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, **2** saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. **3** If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

**4** This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

**5**

"Say to Daughter Zion,

'See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

**6** The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. **7** They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. **8** A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. **9** The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

**10** When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

**11** The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

### "Sneaky King"

200 years before the birth of Jesus an epic war waged between Rome and the Empire of Carthage, centered in Northwestern Africa. Today Tunisia. Rome and Carthage fought a series of battles for dominance of the Mediterranean world known as the Punic Wars. The First Punic War left Carthage humiliated, but capable to paying what they owed to Rome while regrouping and gathering another army. A young general named Hannibal decided to expand into what is now Spain. But his ultimate goal was revenge on Rome itself. Rome had a better navy than Carthage. Rome was well fortified and was expecting another challenge across the sea by Carthage.

So Hannibal had to come up with an unexpected strategy. To do this he had to go overland through Spain and France and attack Rome from the North of Italy which was less fortified. Hannibal had to amass an army of nearly 50,000 infantry, about 20,000 cavalry, and 38 elephants. Yes, elephants he had brought from North Africa. Hannibal was counting on those elephants striking fear in his Roman opponent's and giving him a psychological advantage in battle. But first, his sneak attack required him to get that army and those elephant over the steep Alps that create the border between France and Italy.

Jesus enters into Jerusalem in a sort of sneak attack. But his plan is entirely different. That's because his purpose for entering into Jerusalem is completely distinct from Hannibal's or

any other military commander for that matter. When we look at what Jesus is setting up in Matthew chapter 21, we can see Jesus as a sneaky King. Not that he really surprised anyone. After raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus was going to have a hard time being incognito anywhere. Plus Jerusalem was swelling with pilgrims for the Passover celebration. They were actually expecting Jesus. The parade that went ahead of Jesus and the one that came out from Jerusalem to greet Jesus could have been scripted. But Jesus doesn't come with cavalry, infantry or elephants. Jesus comes mounted on a donkey. He comes accompanied by a ragtag militia of Galilean fishermen and other misfits. And Jesus doesn't come to conquer and subdue. At least not in the expected manner. Jesus comes in humility. He comes to sacrifice. Jesus comes to subdue spiritual forces and conquer enemies of every soul. Jesus knows exactly what he's doing. It's the citizens of Jerusalem, the religious leaders, the political powers, the clamoring crowds who are taken by surprise. To them, just as much to us, Jesus is a sneaky King.

Jesus knows exactly what he's doing. He is the general who has taken his time to survey the overall situation. Jesus knows the carefully devised master plan and every excruciating detail of what it will take. He's fully aware of what he's up against. He has calculated the costs. When he sends out two disciples to bring him a donkey, he is putting that plan into action. When Jesus rides down the slopes of the Mount of Olives to the adoration of crowds, there is no turning back. When the crowds start shouting "**Hosanna!**" and calling Jesus "**the Son of David,**" everyone with any sort of power, religious and political start to take notice. (Matthew 21:9) That shout is like nails on a chalkboard to Pharisees and the religious elite. It's like a flare going up into a starless night for Roman occupiers.

Jesus knows exactly what he is doing, but does anyone else? The crowds spread cloaks before Jesus to offer a makeshift red carpet. They cut down palm branches to create a parade route of glory and honor for the one they looked to with Messianic expectations. They shout Hosanna quoting Psalm 118. Originally it was a cry for help, "Lord, save us." Eventually it took on the character of a greeting, welcoming a dignitary worthy of glory and honor. But when they are specifically questioned about the identity of the one they are welcoming, confusion reigns. "**This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee,**" comes the assessment of the crowds. (Matthew 21:11) The best they could come up with was that Jesus was a prophet.

Jesus came as a king, but was sneaking right under the expectations of a huge crowd. Sneaky, because they knew Jesus was someone special. Sneaky, because even in plain sight, they couldn't see past their own expectations.

When Hannibal set out to conquer Rome, he left behind a huge number of troops back in the Iberian Peninsula. He just didn't feel like he could count on them. He needed numbers. But he was more concerned with quality than quantity. The commitment of those troops was more important than their sheer numbers. Getting everyone together and united behind one battle plan, even one as brazen as crossing the Alps on elephants, requires total buy in from everyone involved.

Sometimes we sell the people of Jerusalem short during this Holy Week. We dismiss them as fickle and superficial, because they just wanted a political ruler with military might just like King David. And there was certainly some of that. But the more complete explanation is more complicated than that. They knew the true Messiah would bring a true spiritual rule. Of course, that would mean peace for God's people on all levels. And whether Jesus was the entire embodiment of those Messianic hopes or not, they certainly recognized that Jesus could be moving along God's ultimate plans for his people. Even as a prophet, Jesus could progress God's restoration of creation. Maybe he wouldn't be a purely militaristic ruler or conquer by political might, but he should be able to put things back the way they are supposed to be. Immediate restoration is on their minds.

Maybe that shouldn't be too surprising. When you welcome Jesus, are you anticipating what Jesus is going to do or what Jesus is supposed to do for you? When you shout praises to Jesus, is it because of who he is or because of the things he can bring you? When your heart swells with excitement at his coming is it because of how he accomplishes his mission or purely based on your ideas of who Jesus should be?

Here's what I mean. It's understandable that you are feeling a bit frustrated. No one blames you for being a little anxious. But what is behind that? Are my frustrations based on expectations for answers? Is my anxiety a result of wanting to know how much good it is doing to shelter in place and when I'll be able to resume normal activities again? Is it frustration over not getting all the right foods from the grocery store or my favorite restaurants? Is it anxiety over not getting answers on my terms on my timetable? We are all feeling a bit disappointed and some degree of depression. But is it because you think that if you were able to sit at a table in Outback Steakhouse again, this would immediately improve? Is it because you firmly believe getting to finish out your softball season will bring joy to your life? Is it because getting to attend your uncle's funeral will alleviate the pain you are experiencing? What unmet expectations are at the root of your frustrations?

More research has blamed our society's boredom and loneliness on technology. Not that computers or cell phones or social media are truly guilty parties. But it's what we do with them. Cultural historian Susan J. Matt comments: "In some ways our dependence on the phone also makes us less independent." She explains: "21st-century Americans are developing all these expectations of having a kind of limitless, completely fulfilling, sociable life at all times, which make us really unequipped to deal with the moments that aren't like that." ("Bored and lonely? Blame your phone." Sean Illing, Vox) And she made those statements before we were quarantined alone with little else beside our phones.

Of course, wanting better lives is not wrong. Wanting to resume softball seasons and participate in family gatherings and breaking outside the confines of your own home isn't wrong or sinful or even selfish. But do they show that you are treating Jesus like a prophet? Is Jesus someone who can put things back the way they are supposed to be according to your definition? Should Jesus bring immediate restoration for all the things that are causing unnecessary complications in your life? In a lot of ways, Jesus is a sneaky King for you and me. His true glory and power are sneaking right under our noses while we look to him to satisfy our cravings and answer your complaints.

Jesus is a sneaky King because he goes alone. Sure there are crowds crying out before him. Sure his disciples accompany him into the capital city for the festival of Passover. But Jesus doesn't need infantry or cavalry and certainly not elephants to become King. Jesus goes into battle alone. That's because only Jesus can do what needs to be done.

Jesus is sneaky, but his plan should be obvious. He comes to make reality the words of prediction by the prophet: **"See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."** (Matthew 21:5) If Jesus had been mounted on a stallion, it would signal coming in power to overthrow. But he comes on a donkey as a lowly King. Yet the humble entrance of Jesus foreshadows his conquering at the cross by suffering and apparent defeat.

Jesus comes to conquer, but not with swords. Not storming city walls or charging palaces to toss out a pretender from his throne. Jesus rules by self-sacrifice. Jesus conquers by giving himself over to petty puppets and pretend powers. His true power is shown in how far he is willing to go to rescue humanity. When the religious leaders thought they had finally gotten rid of him, Jesus snuck God's plan right through the front door. When Pontius Pilate convinced himself he had simply disposed of a problem, Jesus snuck in the ultimate plan to restore God's lost and condemned people back to their loving Father. While the crowds were jeering and Satan was cheering, Jesus snuck in the ultimate conquest of every spiritual enemy for your soul on the cross.

This is how God works, not just in Jesus' ministry, but in my life as well. This is how God conquers. By the cross and crucifixion. This is how God rules. By delivering to hearts the rescue they desperately need even if it's not what we expect. This is how God enacts his most amazing of transformations. Through plans that have us shaking our heads in confusion. God is sneaking in his work to redeem creation.

When Jesus sneaks his victory to you through all your confusion, you can shout your fully-informed "Hosanna!" When you are frustrated by all the things you can't do and places you can't go, Jesus sneaks in to defeat your expectations for him. When you are disappointed by the answers you don't have and the plans you can't make, Jesus sneaks in to give you life's biggest answers. Jesus is with you. When you feel disappointed by all the things you are missing out on, Jesus satisfies your heart with his victory.

You can't be here today in person to wave your palm branches and participate in a procession any more than you can go back in time to join that first Palm Sunday celebration. But you can shout your Hosannas because you know what Jesus was doing at the start of that first Holy Week. You can cry out, "Lord, save us" with the confidence that's exactly what Jesus came to do. You can greet him daily, regularly as he comes as your King worthy of all honor and praise. And you can erase the confusion about who Jesus is. Jesus put things right between you and God. Jesus is your conqueror. Jesus is your sneaky King. Amen.