

John 12:1-19

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2023

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Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." ⁹ When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. ¹² The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ 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!" ¹⁴ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ¹⁵ "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

There's a very old saying about winter in March, which maybe you've heard before. "March comes in like a Lion and goes out like a Lamb." March sits at that pivotal end-of-winter/beginning-of-spring time of year, and so in a lot of places in the world, March comes in like a lion, with its cold air blowing and snow still whipping about, and it goes out like a Lamb, ushering in the peacefulness of spring.

Well, here we are on Palm Sunday, only recently having departed March, and I was thinking about this phrase. Not because our March here in St. Louis was like that—our whole winter seemed to be more like, "Come in like a lamb, go out like a lamb," since it was pretty mild the whole way through. But I was thinking of that phrase, "Comes in like a Lion and goes out like a Lamb," because those two pictures, Lion and Lamb, are both used to describe Jesus throughout the Bible. And here on Palm Sunday, we get to see Jesus as the Lamb—humble and lowly; and we also get to preview Jesus as the Lion—with a roar of triumphant victory. So let's think about Jesus in relation to that phrase, which we really turn around, as we consider the theme: **"Jesus Comes in Like a Lamb and Goes Out Like a Lion"**

My least favorite winters that I can remember were the ones that just dragged on and on and on. There was one winter in Eau Claire when I was in high school when we were getting baseball games snowed out in May, which should just never happen. And it felt plain wrong because we all had dashed expectations. That year, as with every year, we entered March, and you could just smell it,

spring was in the air. You just knew that when you came back from spring break, the snow would be gone and baseball would be in full swing. And a month and a half later, we were still having baseball practice in the gymnasium because the field was still covered in snow. It was a disappointing spring.

Expectations are like that. When you go into something with high expectations, and it doesn't live up to it, you leave disappointed. Like if you have a friend telling you about a new movie that was the *best* movie they'd ever seen, and you go and see it, and, obviously, it's going to have a hard time living up to those lofty expectations, you likely leave disappointed. That happens in a lot of areas with life—when kids are opening presents expecting the best gift ever, or when parents have unrealistic expectations of their children, or when a young couple gets married and each expects to be able to change their spouse—when you have misguided expectations, you're bound to be disappointed.

Well, misguided expectations were at the heart of everything that was going on in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Misguided expectations were the reason why the city gathered together with shouts of, "Hosanna," on Sunday but closed out the week on Friday with shouts of, "Crucify Him!" You see Jesus was a big deal by the time of our text. Everyone was hearing about the miracle He'd performed in Bethany with Lazarus, which John connects to Palm Sunday throughout the text. This miracle resurrection from the dead was the last and greatest of Jesus' signs until His own resurrection. It was intended to get everyone thinking conclusively that Jesus was the Messiah.

And everyone was talking about it. Jerusalem was full of people, as it was the time of the Passover Feast, so that a town that normally housed somewhere in the neighborhood of 20-100 thousand people had swelled to over 2 million. And every one of them had heard and wanted to see Jesus, the miracle worker. So, when they hear He's coming from Bethany, they go out to meet Him with palm branches in their hands and the words of Psalm 118 on their lips. They welcome Him as their king.

The Pharisees think this is their worst nightmares come true, as they say at the end of our text, "***You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.***" But Jesus doesn't let this all go to His head. He doesn't get on His high horse; instead, He sits on a donkey. It's remarkable isn't it, how so many people could be so close to the truth and yet so far away at the same time. They welcomed Jesus as King, as the Son of David, and they're right! But everything that they think He's going to do is wrong. Their expectations for Him are over the moon—that He'll be establishing a wholly Jewish nation, throwing out the Romans, letting the good times roll. And none of it is to be.

They are a people of misguided expectations, and Jesus is not the cause of any of it. Think of all the times in Jesus' ministry when He says, "*Don't tell anyone that I'm the Christ.*" That always seems odd to us. Didn't He want people to know that He was the Messiah? Well, He would if they had any clue what that meant. But Jesus knew that for hundreds of years, the religious teachers had been telling the people that the Messiah was going to be this political leader who would usher in an age of earthly success and glory for the Jews. And Jesus didn't want people to have the wrong idea about Him. This is also why, in our text, Jesus picks a donkey to ride into Jerusalem. Jesus does this as a response to the crowd. They all come out to welcome a king, laying palm branches before Him, and this is His response. Riding in to this welcome, He's accepting all of this as true, but He's riding in on a donkey and not a warhorse as if to say, "*It's all true, but not in the way that you think. I am a King, but not the*

kind of king you think.” Jesus came in riding on a donkey to show that He was **Coming in Like a Lamb**. He was coming in meek and lowly, like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

Some people understood that. Mary, for instance, the day before, anoints Jesus’ feet with this extremely expensive perfume, it cost 300 denarii—so 300 days-worth of wages—over a year of work to buy it. Forget the “two months salary” estimate for purchasing an engagement ring, Mary spent over a year’s wages for this ointment, and I’m certain she wished she could have spent more. Because she knew what was about to happen. She knew He was about to die. She knew **Jesus was coming in like a lamb**. She knew because, unlike the disciples, she was listening to what Jesus was teaching her.

This meekness was clear to Mary, and it would become clearer to the people as well throughout the week. Because instead of fiery speeches condemning the Romans and whipping the Jews into a nationalistic fervor, Jesus spent the week speaking to Gentiles. He went into the temple and warned the people that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed by the Romans. He told the people to pay taxes to Caesar. He told the people that the religious leaders were quacks who were lying to them! And He told them that He was going to die on a cross. And crosses were the way that *Romans* killed people. Imagine if a presidential candidate ran on a platform like that: “*Elect me, and I will be killed by ISIS!*” Who would vote for that person? But no one needed to vote for Jesus except for God the Father, who elected Him as the Lamb of God to be slain from the foundation of the world.

He sent Him to be your King. And the crowds in Jerusalem identified Him as king, but they’ve misunderstood what type of King Jesus would be. They’ve taken the resurrection of Lazarus as the proof that He was going to take away all of their earthly troubles. That He was going to come in like a Lion, rip apart the Romans and destroy all their earthly enemies. They had misguided expectations.

How often, perhaps, do we have misguided expectations of Jesus? When we go through pain, when we suffer, don’t we often wrestle with the question, “Why are you letting this happen to me?” The reason we struggle with that is because we have this unspoken expectation that “if God loves me, He’s going to keep the really big troubles away.” You think about the tragic shootings in Nashville this past week. One of those 9-year-olds who was killed in her classroom was the daughter of the Pastor of the church. Just heartbreaking. And you read that news, and you can’t help but wonder why God didn’t stop it, why God didn’t deliver those Christians, those little Christians from that gunman? But God promised a much greater deliverance than what we often expect, a deliverance so that little Hallie Scruggs and her friends can still live. And that’s why Jesus came riding in on a donkey, why **He Came in Like a Lamb**. He came in humility to lay down His life for you, and it is this very reason why Zechariah proclaims, “**Rejoice greatly! . . . Your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey.**” (Zechariah 9:9)

This lowliness, this salvation, they’re inseparably linked. Jesus has salvation *because* He is lowly. He has salvation *because He Came in Like a Lamb*. Because He has come to bear away the sin of the world. Because He has come to lay down His life and be obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Going through the shame, the pain, the suffering that *our* sins deserve. And in doing so, Jesus lived up perfectly to the *Father’s expectations* of Him, which is proved by His Father raising Him from the dead, vindicating Him, and letting the Lion loose.

This is the glory that John refers to in our text in verse 16, ***“His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified,”***—when John speaks about Jesus being glorified, he’s speaking of Jesus’ crucifixion through His ascension into Heaven, the culmination of His work, the Father then highly exalting Him and giving a name which is above every name. **Jesus Came in Like a Lamb, but He Goes Out Like a Lion.** With a roar of heaven, He burst open the tomb. With a roar of triumph, He went to hell to declare His victory.

John, in His revelation describes Jesus as both the Lamb and the Lion in Revelation 5: ***“And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”*** ⁶ ***And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain. . .*** ⁹ ***And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,*** ¹⁰ ***and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”*** (Revelation 5:5ff) Here is the Lion who has stained Himself red with the blood of His enemies. Behind Him lies death with its throat ripped out. Beneath Him lies that serpent of old, the devil, with its head crushed. Around lie all of your sins torn to pieces. All the times that our false expectations have led us to sin against God or against one another, He has taken them away for good.

Here is the King. The King over all, as Paul wrote in our Epistle, ***“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,”*** (Philippians 2:10) to whom even death has to bow. The people on Palm Sunday cried out to their King, “Hosanna,” which means, “Save us, we pray!” And they were right, He had come to save them. It’s just that He hadn’t come to save them in the way they thought. The salvation that He brought was far greater than the salvation they had expected. He hadn’t come to save them from the Romans or from hunger or from earthly troubles. It was not a salvation *of* this world but a salvation *from* this world. And for this reason, and for *you*, **Jesus Goes Out Like a Lion.**

And by showing us this pattern, ***“In Like a Lamb, Out Like a Lion,”*** Jesus also shows us a pattern of what we should expect in our own lives. You are called to follow Him now—that means suffering first, glory after. *Now*, you are lambs, which means you will be abused and mistreated and even hated. It means you will be taken advantage of, and though you might want to do something, there’s nothing you can do about it. It means you’ll be counted as sheep to the slaughter as the world seeks to quench its thirst with the blood of Christ’s church. But it also means that you are safe in the arms of your Shepherd. It also means that with the roar of the Lion, He will summon you from your graves to eternal glory.

You will stand before the throne of the King, the Lamb who was slain, the Lion who arose, and you will sing a song of unending glory, waving palm branches and singing with a crowd very different from the fickle throngs of Jerusalem who quickly changed their tune. Your song of victory and praise will never end and will never change. Have *this* expectation about Your Savior and through Your Savior: ***“In Like a Lamb and Out Like a Lion.”*** Expect this, and you will never be disappointed, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.