

Matthew 21:1-9

Advent 1, December 3, 2023

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Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³

If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ⁵ "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

I'm sure you remember Christmas from when you were younger—the excitement, the anticipation for opening your presents. You get home from the Christmas Eve service, or perhaps you wake up early Christmas morning, you plop down in front of the tree, and rising before you is that mountain of colorful wrapping and boxes and bags and ribbons and endless possibilities. And then you set to opening your presents, one after another, maybe culminating in that gift that your parents were most excited to give you.

And then when you finished—when all the gifts were unwrapped—were you ever disappointed? Kind of a terrible thought, one that if you've ever felt, you probably tried to bury it deep in your mind because you feel so ashamed about it. It's a selfish thing, isn't it? To open up presents that others worked hard to get for you—the idea that you could come away from that disappointed—it's disgusting! And yet, I'm sure many of us have been there before! Particularly when you were children, perhaps there was a toy that you'd really set your heart on, that you asked your parents for. And when the gifts were opened and it wasn't included, you were a little disappointed.

So maybe then, as you grew older, you determined to not let yourself get too excited or too hopeful for any one present. You lowered your expectations, determined to just be happy with whatever you got, since that is the better attitude to have. And that might work for the gifts that other people give to you, but would that same attitude work for the gifts that God gives to you? No, not at all. In fact, we *should* expect the very best gifts from God, and we will never be disappointed.

But at the same time, it is important that we recognize what those very best gifts actually are. Because if we have high expectations of the wrong sort, then we'll be disappointed. But high expectations of the right sort—God will always surpass our greatest expectations. And so, the theme we'll be considering today is:

How Do You Prepare for Christmas?

- I. With worldly hype? → Disappointment
- II. With spiritual hope? → Unending Joy

Now, it might seem odd that here we are on the first Sunday of Advent—that time of year that we so strongly associate with Jesus' birth—and here we are reading about Palm Sunday, an event that came

just before Jesus' death! But it's a very good text for us to consider today. The word "advent" means "coming" or "arrival." This time of year, we focus on Jesus' coming, both at His birth in Bethlehem and when He comes again on the last day in glory. And so, we can look at Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and we can see what kind of King is coming to us *and* what we can expect from Him.

We open our text as Jesus and His disciples draw near to Jerusalem, having traveled a great distance to be in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. And here is something unusual. Jesus has made the journey on foot thus far, and now as He nears the end of His travels, He calls for a *donkey* to ride on for the last bit of the journey. That's exactly the opposite of what most of the other Passover pilgrims would have done, who would travel the bulk of their journey on a mount of some kind, only dismounting to make the last little climb up to Jerusalem on foot. But Jesus *does* indeed pause there in Bethphage, only about two miles from Jerusalem, to wait for his mount to arrive.

And that might have seemed unusual to the disciples, after all, in their trips to Jerusalem in the *past* Jesus had never requested a donkey. But He tells them where to go, what they'll find, what they should say, and it all plays out exactly as Jesus told them. And Matthew doesn't leave us in suspense as to *why* Jesus was making this sudden change in His travel arrangements: ***"This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"***

And as Jesus rode into Jerusalem mounted on that donkey, things started to click for the crowd that was already present for the feast. Any who were familiar with that prophecy from Zechariah and who were waiting for the Messiah to come saw the signs and started to put two and two together. And so, they greeted Him. ***"Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest.'"***

That cry that echoed in the city streets, "Hosanna," is a Hebrew word meaning, "Save us, we pray." Truly a fitting cry to greet the one who had indeed come to save them! *Except*, it doesn't seem that most were aware of what the Messiah was coming to save them *from*. You probably know, it seems that most Jews in Jesus' day had bought into this **worldly hype** proclaimed about the Messiah by their spiritual leaders. It was widely disseminated that the Messiah would come to deliver the Jews from Roman rule. The thought was that He would bring to Jerusalem what Caesar Augustus had brought to the Roman Empire—the *Pax Romana*, that is the "Peace of Rome." Except, in *this* case it would be "Peace *from* Rome."

And can you imagine what the Roman soldiers were thinking as they saw this scene play out? *Already* dealing with an incredible influx of immigrants in the city, now seeing a massive crowd surging down the slopes of the Mount of Olives, surrounding this man riding on a donkey, acclaiming and honoring Him as their King—I'm sure they were shaking in their boots, assuming this rabble was about to assault the praetorium! But *then*, Jesus makes this odd turn as He enters the city. He doesn't head straight to the praetorium to stage a coup; He turns and goes toward the temple. He does so because this King is going to be *different* from every other king. Every king of the earth comes and *takes* from you, but this King comes to give *to* you, in fact, to give *Himself* to you.

And for those who had prepared for the Messiah's arrival by buying into the worldly hype, this was a massive disappointment. A disappointment so great, that we know that the city currently crying out "Hosanna," will in just a few short days turn into an angry mob crying out "crucify Him!" They received Him as a King, but they were expecting a king of a different sort. Well, what kind of king are we expecting to come to us this Advent season? Of course, we *confess* to believe in the King who comes to deliver us from our sins, from death and the devil—a spiritual deliverance—but isn't it true that we *act* like we expect Him to bring another kind of deliverance as well?

Consider the past week and ask yourself: "What did I seek to make my god this week?" What was your king the last seven days? What was your highest good? Was it God? Or was it your earthly life? What kinds of things were you prioritizing with your time? Or think about your prayer life. How much of your prayers were focused on asking God for some sort of physical blessing, for some sort of earthly help? Not that there's anything wrong with asking God for physical help, but certainly we tend to prioritize that sort of thing in our prayers, showing our focus is usually earthbound.

Or, did you see anything on the news and wonder how God could let this happen? Or, maybe something struck more closely to home, and you started to question God's love for you. After all, if God really loved me, how could He allow something like that to happen to *me*? We *know* that God doesn't promise us wealth, or prosperity, or even happiness—but still, that is what we want from Him, isn't it? *That's* where our focus lies. So, what kind of King do we want Jesus to be? What kind of King are we seeking? Are we preparing for His arrival with *worldly* hype? If so, we'll be disappointed just like the crowd was when they saw that Jesus *didn't* come to sit on an earthly throne.

Now, here's the good news. We don't actually *seek out* our King. He, in fact, seeks us out. And during Advent, we remember and rejoice that Jesus comes to *us*. Listen to that prophecy again, "**Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.**" Your King comes to *you*. And this runs counter to all of our intrinsic theological intuition. All of our religious instincts, our default religious mode that is informed by our sinful flesh tells us that we need to climb up the ladder up to God. That we need to prove ourselves in such a way that we can now appear before God. It's about *us* and *our* ascent, *our* striving, *our* climbing, *our* doing, *our* efforts.

But our text today reminds us, "No. *God* comes down to you." Your Savior comes to you. He came to us as a baby in a manger, He came to Jerusalem as a king on a donkey, He *will* come again at the end, and He even comes to us *right* now. This is what happens every Sunday in our worship services. Here's a question to think about: if you went around and conducted a survey of Christians, and asked them, "What is worship? What happens when a Christian worships?" I think you would get an answer that is something like this: "Worship is presenting to God *our* praise and thanksgiving." "Worship is where we go to serve God." "Worship is where we gather together to give God the glory." Now, that's true, that's *part* of it. But that's actually the *least* important part of worship. Worship is not *our* gathering to serve God, but rather our being gathered together so that *Jesus* can serve us! Remember what Jesus says about this: "**The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**" (Matthew 20:28) Or think about when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. He said: "**For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.**" (Luke 22:27) And this is *still* true.

We naturally want to resist this idea, because the proper arrangement in our mind should be us serving God not God serving us. We're like Peter. Remember when Jesus took off His robe, and wrapped a towel around Himself, and went to wash His disciples' feet—remember what Peter said? **"You shall never wash my feet."** (John 13:8) "It shouldn't be this way!" Peter thought. But Jesus corrected him, **"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."** (John 13:8)

We *must* be served by Jesus, we must be *blessed* by Him, we must be *cleansed* by Him, we must sit at the table, and *He* must serve us—otherwise, we have no part with Him. And so, Christian worship turns our natural instincts about religion on its head. Instead of appearing before God so that *we* can serve *Him*, we appear before God so that *He* can serve *us*. And that's why we're here today. We are gathered here today, and we know that God is present, that God is here. And you might think, "Well, yes, but God is everywhere." And that's true, but He's here today to give you spiritual hope. He's here to bless you. He's here to forgive your sins.

Today, we are gathered in His presence to be served *by* Him. And now *we* can respond singing with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven: **"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; Heav'n and earth are full of Thy glory!"** We can respond with the crowds of Jerusalem: **"Hosanna in the Highest. Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest!"** Today, we can echo that cry of "Hosanna," "Save us, we pray," and we will not be disappointed. You see, this is *exactly* what your Savior has come to do for you today.

The devil wants us to doubt these things. He wants us to doubt that God is real, he wants us to doubt that God's Word is true, he wants us to doubt that Jesus is coming again, he wants us to doubt that Jesus was in our flesh the first time, he wants us to doubt that God forgives us and saves us and brings us to life eternal—he wants us to doubt all of it. But all of this doubt is done away with when Jesus serves you, as He will in a few moments with His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. So, when the devil comes to you, tempting you to doubt, asking you, "How do you know that you are a Christian? Look at all these things that you've done. Look at all the doubts bouncing around in your mind. Look at all that sin in your heart!" What do you say? You can say, **"Jesus has served *me*. Jesus gave me His body and blood, and He said that this is for *me*, for the forgiveness of *my* sins. My King has come to *me*, righteous and having salvation. And He has it for a sinner like *me*."**

This is what you can expect from Him. This is what you can anticipate. As we consider our Savior's coming to us this Advent season, we can have the highest of expectations. We can expect the gift of full forgiveness for *every one* of our sins. We can expect our Savior to write our names in the Book of Life. We can expect our Savior to prepare a place for us at His side in heaven. We can expect Him to come again and take us to Himself, so that where He is there we may be also. We can expect all of this, the highest good. So, as you prepare for Christmas, prepare with spiritual hope, with the highest of expectations, and you will never be disappointed. Thanks be to God, 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.