

*Psalm 118:1-2, 19-21 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever!

<sup>2</sup>Let Israel say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”

<sup>19</sup>Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the LORD.

<sup>20</sup>This is the gate of the LORD;  
the righteous shall enter through it.

<sup>21</sup>I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.

*Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)*

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” <sup>4</sup>They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the  
name of the Lord!

<sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our  
ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

<sup>11</sup>Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

*Hosanna! The long wait is over. We welcome the King into our city and into our lives.  
But are we ready to embrace the surprises he brings?*

*The crowds are gathered outside the city walls of Jerusalem, at the eastern gate. They are ready and they are pumped! The day has come. At long last, when it seemed that God would never hear their cries, God has sent his Messiah, his anointed one. This king, from the house of David, would inaugurate a true God-intended kingdom and set about to put the world right. At long last, the Jews would be free of their hated Roman oppressors. At long last, the temple would be cleansed of all the money-grubbing, ambitious pagan influences. At long last God’s king was arriving, ready to be welcomed into the city as a king should be welcomed. Hosanna<sup>1</sup>, indeed!*

#### Jerusalem at Passover

Ancient Jerusalem was a sprawling city with a population of 60,000 or so. But at festival time, the city’s population would swell to nearly 200,000. And no festival was bigger or more well-attended than Passover.

In Jesus’ day, Passover presented a real problem for the Roman occupiers. Not only was the city stuffed with throngs of Jews who resented the Romans as easily as they breathed, Passover itself was emotionally charged. Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, would come to Jerusalem himself each year for the duration of Passover to oversee the peace-keeping. Pilate’s headquarters were in the Antonia Fortress, overlooking the temple and its expansive courtyards. Roman guards would stand atop the fortress walls as they kept a nervous eye on the crowds below. And Passover was a problem for the Romans that would not go away. About twenty years after Jesus, more than 20,000 Jews were killed in riots during Passover.

None of this is really surprising. After all, Passover celebrated the Exodus from Egypt, when God had saved the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors. It certainly didn’t take much imagination to lump the hated Romans in with Pharaoh. Passover was all about liberation and freedom, yet the Jews had to celebrate it under the eye of the pagan Roman soldiers. The typical Jew on the street anxiously awaited the day when God would free them from the Romans just as he had freed them from Egypt. And it would be God’s Messiah who would usher in that great day.

<sup>1</sup> “Hosanna” means “Save us!”

*As for Jesus, he purposely wraps all these messianic symbols around himself: the colt, the ride through the city gates, the palm branches, the cloaks laid out in front of him, the shouted Hosannas. All of it. And for the first time, Jesus refers to himself as "Lord" (Mark 11:3). The waiting is over; the time has come.*

Have you ever waited so long for something that you could hardly stand it, that you thought you'd burst. Or worse, you gave up hope that the time would come at all. I can remember waiting for Christmas as a young boy. Each day after Thanksgiving seemed to last a week. By Dec 22 or so, my anticipation was so worked up that it was all I could do to hang on. And, of course, as any wise person would tell you, no matter how wonderful Christmas actually was, it could never match up to my expectation.

I guess it was a bit like that for the Jews in Jesus' day. They had waited so long for the arrival of their Savior, their Redeemer, their Messiah (see the page three textbox). Indeed, there

had been a few would-be Messiahs in the decades before Jesus and there would be some more after his death and resurrection. Now, it was this carpenter from the small village of Nazareth who was putting himself forward as Messiah.

And so he was welcomed by such crowds as turned out on that Sunday before the Passover. Hopes, dreams, expectations . . . all focused on Jesus as he rode that small colt in through the city gates.

And yet, five days later, Jesus was hung on a Roman cross to die after being ridiculed by Jerusalem crowds. Granted, we can't know how many from the crowds on Sunday were present in the crowds on Friday. But the question remains, why was the city not swept up in messianic fervor as the week proceeded?

Why? Because Jesus, God's Messiah, was not what they expected. They wanted a king who would lead them to victory against their pagan oppressors. Instead, Jesus would bring them God's victory as he hung on that cross.

Perhaps Palm Sunday is a good time for us all to think about our own expectations of Jesus. What do we do when, like Philip Yancey, we meet the Jesus we never knew?

It is easy to shape Jesus into a savior who meets our perceived needs and expectations, who is a Rorschach blot waiting to be brought to life. Certainly, scholars on Jesus have this problem. In their research, they often find the "historical" Jesus that they are looking for. Why should we think that we are exempt from the same problem?

God inspired the writings of the New Testament so that, in them, we can meet and welcome into our lives the genuine article, the Jesus-who-is. And like those first palm-wavers, we better prepare ourselves to be surprised.

### What is distinct about Mark's Palm Sunday?

In his *Interpretation* series commentary on Mark's gospel, Lamar Williamson helps us to see Mark's distinctive portrait of Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem. (I've abridged and edited his comments somewhat for better readability.)

"The significance of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is differently understood in each of the four Gospels. In John's, the procession is altogether triumphant, complete with palm branches and the acknowledgement of Jesus' opponents that 'the world has gone after him.' Matthew, like John, quotes the messianic text in Zech. 9:9 but lays greater stress on the paradoxical nature of Jesus' kingship: "Your king is coming to you, *humble* ..." (Matt. 21:5). In Luke, though the crowds hail Jesus as King and the Pharisees call him "Teacher," the evangelist depicts Jesus as the prophet who foretells the destruction of the city and weeps over it (Luke 19:41-44). In Mark, this latter trait is deferred to chapter 13. Jesus is not shown as the king who, though glorious, is nonetheless lowly. Rather, Jesus enters as the lowly one, hero only to a motley rabble, but he is ironically more of a king than they think.

With attention fixed on Jesus, the reader is pointed to the authoritative lowliness of God displayed in Jesus Christ. That lowliness is, of course, seen elsewhere in Jesus' life and ministry; but here its quiet dignity and hidden majesty come to the fore. Lowliness is a quality all too seldom associated with God, even by those who hold that God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

To be clear about the grandeur of the divine lowliness is important because we tend to become like the God or gods we worship. It is easy enough to join the crowds that sing "Hosanna" fore and aft of Jesus. Jesus makes no objection to these demonstrations, but his silence in their midst is striking. For those who look and listen intently, his silent presence may become compelling. Some will follow in his way, acknowledging that they know him but in part. They will know failure, as did that first, fickle crowd. But by the grace of a crucified and risen Lord, those who continue to follow him may come also to share, in some measure, his lowliness and his strength."

### *Longing for a King . . . and a liberator*

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel's greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David's kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). *But* . . . four hundred years after David's death, Jerusalem burned. The Temple built by David's son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God's people were in exile, including their king, who was blinded by the Babylonians after being forced to watch the execution of his sons.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were "kings" only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, they had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, at which time all the world would see that the Jews' confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God's king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God's kingdom, more than a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar. And all these messianic pretenders were eventually executed by the Romans.

In 27AD or so, one Jew named Jesus, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, Jesus had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the Kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy not vengeance, and peace not rebellion. Like the prophets of old, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike those prophets, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God's people. Not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God's people.

As Mark tells us in today's passage, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But, as he had done so often, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Zechariah told of God's king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. We may have trouble seeing Jesus' arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but the crowds certainly didn't. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted "Hosanna!" meaning "save us." They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel's oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They waved palm branches, symbols of abundance and thanks.

The enthusiasm of the crowds was lost on no one. The Pharisees, the keepers of the old way, were obviously frustrated with the whole thing, for they muttered to themselves, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (John 12:19).

However, Jesus knew that the enthusiasm of the crowds would soon falter. He knew that unless he gave up his course and abandoned the vocation given him by the Father, his confrontation with the Jewish leadership and the Romans would soon come to a head. But of course, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way to that cross only days later, turning a symbol of shame into the place of God's victory over sin and death.

### **READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAR 16 - 22**

**Monday, 2 Samuel 22** David's last words and thanksgiving here is also Psalm 118.

**Tuesday, Zechariah 9:9-17** The coming of Israel's king; the Lord will appear.

**Wednesday, 2 Kings 9:1-13** Jehu is welcomed into Jerusalem and anointed king.

**Thursday, Mark 14** Jesus' day and evening before his crucifixion.

**Friday, Mark 15** Jesus goes before Pilate and is crucified.

**Saturday, Luke 24** Luke's resurrection accounts. (We'll read Mark's on Easter).

## Sermon Notes

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### **Get the Monkey Off Your Back:**

#### ***Making Sense of Creation and Evolution***

#### **A New *Something Else* series on Sundays beginning April 6**

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning.**

**No class on Easter. On March 30: a world religions Q & A**

### **Spring Bible Academy starts March 31**

**To register go to [www.thebibleacademy.com](http://www.thebibleacademy.com)**

We've got another great class line-up for this spring. There will be the usual offering of diverse, interesting, and meaningful classes during the day and in the evening. We've also got another one-day Saturday workshop scheduled. As always, childcare will be provided. Please join us . . . and register soon.

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is hailed as the returning king. But, only a few days later, the crowd shouts "crucify him!" What do you think may explain the crowds' swift move from an enthusiastic high for Jesus to their abandonment of him? Are there parallels to our own Christian walk? There are times when our own enthusiasm and commitment to Christ are seemingly unbounded – we really *feel it!* But at other times, the reality of Jesus can seem remote and distant; we feel cold and spiritually dry. Why is this? What can we do to stay more constant in our relationship with God? How do you get through periods of spiritual dryness when you do not feel close to God?
2. For all Jews other than those living in Jerusalem, the great Festivals, like Passover, were times of pilgrimage. Thousands of Jews from all over Palestine would stream to Jerusalem to gather at God's temple in unity and celebration as the people of God. What place do pilgrimages have in our lives? Are there pilgrimages you make? Many families make pilgrimages at certain holidays, gathering to celebrate together. Unfortunately, many of us have a tendency to exhaust ourselves in these "pilgrimages." What ought to characterize our pilgrimages? The coming week leads us to holiest days in the Christian calendar: Maundy Thursday (the Last Supper), Good Friday (Jesus' crucifixion and death), and Easter (Jesus' resurrection). As we finish our pilgrimage to these days, how will you complete your preparation?