

Zechariah 9:9 (NRSV)

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Luke 19:28-40 (NRSV)

²⁸After he [Jesus] had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.' " ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop."

⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Do you enjoy a good party? The crowds in Jerusalem were ready to welcome Jesus to the biggest party ever. They thought they were celebrating an ending; but it would soon prove to be only a beginning.

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-ruled 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. Hosanna¹, indeed!

Zechariah

Zechariah was a prophet working in Judah in the years immediately after King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home from exile in Babylonia. Thus, Zechariah is among the "post-exilic" prophets.

The book of Zechariah contains prophetic writings and visions aimed at encouraging the Jews to rebuild the temple and stay true to God. Zechariah brought them God's promises that the future of Jerusalem and the Jews was bright, and that, one day, Israel's king would return to Jerusalem in triumph.

Zechariah is one of the twelve "minor" prophets, whose writings close our Old Testament. It is important to realize that "minor" refers only to the length of these books, not their importance!

¹ "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”. The waiting is over; the time has come.

I bet you like a good party as much as I do. Who doesn't? And that Sunday in Jerusalem was supposed to be the beginning of the biggest and best party ever. A celebration of salvation. A freedom party. The arrival of the most amazing gift of all – God's rescue of Israel from the oppressors and the pagans.

Messiahs and Kings

There are certain keys to understanding the Gospels. One of these is the relationship between our understandings of messiah, king, and God.

To a first-century Jew, Jesus' claim to be the Messiah was to say that he was God's King, the one who would inaugurate the coming of God's kingdom. This is why Matthew takes pains in the first chapter of his gospel to show that Jesus could lay claim to the house of David, for God's king was to come from David's line.

To a first-century Jew, claiming to be the Messiah was not a claim to be God. There was no sense of divinity in the Jewish understanding of the Messiah.

You see, it was Passover Week. Every spring, Jews from all over converged on Jerusalem for this festival. It had been instituted by the LORD God Almighty more than a thousand years before. Ever since, God's people had remembered and participated in the rescue of the Hebrews from Egypt as they gathered in homes on a spring evening each year.

And this year promised to be the Passover to top all Passovers, for God was about to do his big thing. The time had come. The day had arrived for the keeping of all the promises God had made through his prophets. And it was start with one man from Galilee.

It seemed almost impossible to believe, there had been so many disappointments. But the momentum had been building. Crowds had escorted this man, Jesus was his name, through Jericho, not far from Jerusalem. There, Jesus had brought salvation even to a hated tax collector named Zaccheus. It seemed that everyone, really everyone, was invited to participate in this party.

And now Jesus had arrived at Jerusalem and was preparing to wrap himself in all the messianic symbols available. No one was to misunderstand the meaning of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. . . . *but what it really mean?*

The arrival

Nearly ten years ago, my family and I were blessed to see a Broadway revival of Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*. The musical is set in the Iowa town of River City around the turn of the twentieth century. In one scene, the whole town turns out to await the arrival of the Wells Fargo wagon, the weekly UPS truck of the day. No telling what treasures were on that wagon. What dreams would be fulfilled when the wagon stopped and unloaded its cargo?

The Jews of Jesus' day were waiting for a Wells Fargo wagon. And what would be on that wagon when it arrived? It would carry a Messiah, who would in all power and might and wonder and glory throw out the pagan oppressors and cleanse the temple, restoring it to a proper dwelling place of God. The wagon would carry all the nations of the world who would stream to Jerusalem to acknowledge and worship the LORD God. The wagon would carry all those who had died and would now be resurrected, re-embodied to new life. Sons would embrace their long-dead grandmothers and mothers would meet their children who had died during birth. There would be no more tears, except of joy. There would be no death and no mourning, no wars and violence, no

hatred or arrogance, no privilege nor division. All would live in peace, enjoying a renewed and restored land, worshiping without end the one who had made them and who was now making all things new.

That was the wagon the crowds thought they were welcoming on that Sunday in Jerusalem. The work was over; the party was just about to get rolling.

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.

Of course, five days later, all those expectations had been dashed against a rock called Golgotha. Most turned away, hoping to pick the right wagon another time. Even after the Sunday morning of the empty tomb, only a few believed that they had welcomed God's wagon after all.

But those few, Jesus' disciples, had met the risen Jesus. He had given them work to do. To be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. To make disciples. To baptize people into a newly born community that would not simply wait for God to finish his work, but to accomplish work of their own. They were to build for the kingdom of God. They were to live out the reality of their claim that, in Christ, they had been reborn. It was as if they were to found and then grow colonies of a new human race.

The shape of these Spirit-of-Christ-empowered new colonies was clear. They were to pray together, to learn together, to worship together, to share the Lord's meal together. They were to feed and clothe, to ensure that not a single person among them was in need of the basics. As best they could, they were to enact heaven-on-earth in all that they did – this was how they were to do life together.

You and I may be living 2,000 years later, but the mission is unchanged. We are to be disciple-making witness to the living Lord. We too are to feed and clothe, to love our neighbor, recognizing that our neighbors include those we dislike or even hate or are even our sworn enemies. Jesus came for all and his kingdom is for all who will respond to his invitation.

In Christ, we experience the fullness of God's eternity – here and now. This is one way we "out live" our lives. But in another sense, we out live our lives by living outwardly, embracing the world around us and all those who share it with us. Palm Sunday is not an ending at all, but always and ever, a vibrant new beginning.

Distinctive Features of Luke's Palm Sunday Story

In his commentary in the *Interpretation* series, Fred Craddock reviews several distinctive features of Luke's story. Notice what is present and what is missing in Luke's account of that day.

Several features in Luke's account of this event call for close attention. First, notice that the entry involves Jesus and his disciples. Disciples secure the colt, disciples place Jesus on the colt, disciples called him the King who comes in the name of the Lord (Luke only echoes Zech. 9:9; Matthew and John both quote the prophecy). There is no ovation by the general crowds that are in the city for the festival (Matt. 21:9) or by those who had gathered because of reports about the raising of Lazarus (John 12:12); Jesus is honored and praised by his followers. This is not the group which turns cold and later calls for Jesus' crucifixion. His disciples did not fully understand his messiahship, to be sure, but neither are they persons who sing praise and scream death the same week. The portrait of such a fickle crowd must come from some account other than Luke's. The story as Luke tells it is less crowded and more subdued, but it is an event of and for believers, and its meaning lies in Jesus and in their faith in him, meaning that is in no way related to public favor or disfavor, participation or nonparticipation. This is not to say Jesus' followers have come to clarity and maturity; the events soon to transpire will test them, and some will fail. But at this moment, descending the Mount of Olives, they are right.

Second, Luke's account contains no mention of hosannas, of palms, or of branches cut from trees. Those belonged to parades and festivals with nationalistic overtones, and Luke apparently wants this event to carry no such implication. Perhaps this is also the reason the bursts of praise contain no references to David or to the Davidic throne. The word "King" is used (v. 38), but it seems to be without political force. In fact, the expressions of praise to the King join Ps. 118:26 and the words of the heavenly host at the birth of Jesus (2:14). "King" is placed beside "Peace"; there is nothing here to support the charge against him before Pilate (23:2).

Memory Verse of the Week

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV)

This is known as Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples, given to them as Jesus returned to the Father following his resurrection. This was their commission and it is ours too.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following questions for discussion and reflection are from the Fellowship Group curriculum for the current series, prepared by St. Andrew's preaching pastors.

1. If you have been attending church for a while, what are some of your favorite Palm Sunday memories? If you are new to church, what were your impressions of the Palm Sunday "experience"?
2. It is very easy to go from Palm Sunday right into Easter and ignore Maundy Thursday (Jesus' Last Supper) and Good Friday (Jesus' crucifixion). What would you tell someone who asked you why it is called "Good Friday"? After all, it is the day that Jesus was killed. What could be good about that?
3. Palm Sunday was not an ending but a beginning. The disciples may have thought that their journey is over, their work done. But they were only getting started. In the same way, when we come to faith in Christ, it is a beginning. Talk about where you are on your journey and how you are living out Jesus' commission to be his witnesses, to make disciples, to feed and to clothe?
4. What could you do this year to keep Good Friday in the front of your mind and heart? (Hint – attending the Good Friday service would be a good start!)
5. What is your work in building for the kingdom of God? How could you make a fresh start at this work? With whom will you join in this work?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 2 Kings 9:11-13 Cloaks are laid out at Jehu's anointing as king</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 118 A psalm of thanksgiving for victory over Israel's enemies; quoted in Luke's account</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 21:1-11 Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem</p>	<p>Thursday, John 12:1-19 John's account is the only one to mention palm branches specifically!</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 11:1-11 Mark's account of Palm Sunday. Now that you've read all four accounts, how do they differ? How are they similar? Do you think there are any important differences among the messages of each?</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

