

YHWH Returns to Zion

Palm Sunday Weekend – April 8/9, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Psalm 50:1-6 (NRSV)

- ¹The mighty one, God the LORD¹,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to its setting.
- ²Out of Zion², the perfection of beauty,
God shines forth.
- ³Our God comes and does not keep silence,
before him is a devouring fire,
and a mighty tempest all around him.
- ⁴He calls to the heavens above
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
- ⁵“Gather to me my faithful ones,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!”
- ⁶The heavens declare his righteousness,
for God himself is judge.

John 12:12-15 (NRSV)

- ¹²The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,
“Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”
- ¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:
¹⁵“Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

We gather today to celebrate our Lord’s arrival in Jerusalem. But we are to do more today than just remember. We are to welcome Christ into our own worshipping community. Come, Lord Jesus!

Why “Good” Friday?

I get this question often. It is certainly understandable.

The etymology of the “Good” here is not clear. Some think it comes from “God’s Friday.” Other scholars believe it simply derives from the German, *Gute Freitag*. But regardless of where the English term came from, the theology of “Good Friday” can be embraced by all Christians.

Calling it “Good Friday” acknowledges that out of the horrible tragedy of Jesus’ crucifixion came the greatest possible good – God’s victory over sin and death.

Standing at the foot of Jesus’ cross on Friday, it would have been impossible to see any good in it at all. Without Easter, Jesus’ story would have been a tragedy. The memory of his actions and teachings might have been cherished by his immediate followers, but he would have gone down in history as one of several well-meaning but failed messiahs in the first century.

But Jesus’ resurrection meant that he had triumphed over death and, because death was the consequence of sin, he had triumphed over sin as well. Jesus’ resurrection meant that God had acted in the present world to restore humanity and all of creation to a right relationship with himself. What could be a greater “good” than that?

We all love parades and parties. People always have. Nearly 2,000 years ago crowds gathered outside the city walls of Jerusalem for a parade. When people go to parades they know what they are going there to celebrate. It was no different for the residents of Jerusalem who turned out that Sunday. They knew what they were there for. The long oppression of the Jews was about to come to an end. God had, at long last, raised up a national hero, God’s anointed one, who would lead Israel to freedom from their Roman overseers. It would be a new Exodus! What a parade it must have been.³

Had the crowds known that Jesus had been anointed with expensive perfume and oil before entering the city, their excitement would have known no bounds. In Hebrew, “Messiah” means “anointed one.” But, of course, Jesus had not been anointed as a conquering political hero, he had been anointed for burial (John 12:1-8). Things were not what they seemed on the parade route.

¹Every place in your Old Testament that LORD (in the small caps) appears, the Hebrew is actually YHWH, the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. This name was so holy to the ancient Jews that whenever Scripture was read, they would say *adonai* (Hebrew for “Lord”) each time they came upon YHWH in the text. Thus, the title of this study speaks of God returning to Zion.

²“Zion” is a Hebrew word whose meaning is uncertain, but may have once meant “fortress” or “citadel,” as on a mountaintop. “Zion” came to be an immensely important symbolic and theological word for Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, the world’s center from which God’s word would go out to all nations. Thus, verse 2 in the Psalm can be read, “Out of Jerusalem, the perfection of beauty, God shines out.”

³We call this Palm Sunday thanks only to the Gospel writer, John. He is the only writer that tells us about palms and explicitly places the welcoming on the Sunday before the Passover.

Who is Jesus?

This is the Palm Sunday question. It was the question for Jerusalem 2,000 years ago and it is the question for our world still. And it is a question that we can answer only through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

The Palm-waving crowds rightly expect that Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed one. In John's brief telling of Jesus' welcoming, the crowds shout Hosanna, which means "save us" in Hebrew. They sing out "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel." This is from Psalm 118, a song of God's victory, the day when God has finally acted. But the crowds wrongly expect that Jesus is to be a warrior King, that the anticipated violent confrontation with Rome has come to a head.

John helps us to see that things are not as the crowds expect. The crowds thought they knew Jesus, but they did not (John 1:10). John's quote about the donkey is taken from Zechariah 9:9. This is a passage about the coming ruler of God's people – very messianic in other words. But John changes the opening words of the quotation from "*Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion*" to "*Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*" Here, John draws on Zephaniah 3.⁴ The fuller quote from Zephaniah 3:14-16 (I've underlined a key phrase) will make clearer what John is trying to accomplish with the change:

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

It is not just the Messiah whom the crowds welcome into the city, it is the LORD God himself. Centuries before, Ezekiel had brought to the people terrifying visions of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem before its burning by the Babylonians. In the centuries since, despite the rebuilding of the temple, there wasn't really any sign that God had returned.⁵ The Jews still awaited the fulfillment of God's promise: "See, I am sending a messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1). What must the crowds of followers have thought when, on Monday, Jesus didn't head for the Antonia Fortress to confront the Romans but to the temple, where he would invoke the words of Jeremiah pronouncing judgment on the people and *their* temple. A couple of decades later, long before the writing of any of the Gospels, Paul would describe the body of Christ as *God's* temple, as well as each individual believer (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20).

Whom do we welcome?

When we sing our Hosannas and wave our palms, who is it that we welcome into our worshipping congregation? Do we, like the crowds in Jerusalem, see Jesus as no more than the fixer of all our problems? Do we worship Christ only if it works for us? If so, what do we do when our problems are not fixed to our liking. Some of the palm-waving crowd in Jerusalem would have still been alive forty years later to see the Romans burn the city and the people's temple to the ground. Sadly, some of us will have marriages that fail, relationships that crumble, and hopes that go unrealized.

Can we, instead, welcome Jesus as our Lord, our Master? Can we look ahead to Good Friday and see in it an invitation to love sacrificially? Can we come to the parade and see the rest of the story?

⁴I am continually struck by how carefully constructed are the Gospels and the other New Testament writings. John, like the other writers, skillfully pulls together Scriptural quotations and allusions to make his points. We might wonder whether any of his readers could comprehend John's careful use of the Old Testament, but that is only because our own knowledge of Scripture is so inadequate. We miss things that would be plainly evident to John's first readers.

⁵I don't have the space to develop this, but here is the general idea. The Jews believed that their exile to Babylon (their trip to jail) had been punishment for their sin. Though they had returned to the land they were certainly still in jail with the Romans being the latest in a long line of jailers. They would not be released from jail until their sins had been forgiven – and the coming of the Day of the Lord, to be ushered in by God's Messiah, would entail such forgiveness and, hence, the restoration of Israel. . . . That's a lot packed into a few sentences, but this is a footnote after all!

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

April 9 - 15

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>Day 1 Joshua 10-12; Psalm 55 The sun stands still at Jericho; a summary of Joshua's conquests</p>	<p>Day 2 Joshua 13-15; Psalm 56 Parts of Canaan that remain unconquered; the distribution of land</p>
<p>Day 3 Joshua 16-18; Psalm 57 more on the territories</p>	<p>Day 4 Joshua 19-21; Psalm 58 the territory of the Israelite tribes; cities of refuge and cities given to the Levites</p>
<p>Day 5 Joshua 22-24; Psalm 59 Joshua, now old, urges the Israelites to stay true to God; the tribes renew the covenant</p>	<p>Day 6 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 7 Matthew 1-4; Psalm 60 Jesus' genealogy and birth; the wise men and the flight to Egypt; John the Baptist begins his ministry; Jesus is baptized and tempted in the wilderness; begins his ministry in Galilee</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up fast. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. We read Scripture well when we read it as a community.

In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to gain a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us. We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewcccl.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his brief telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, John wants us to see that the crowds rightly welcome Jesus as a king, as God's anointed. But he also wants us to see that the crowds do not understand how God's work to redeem them will move forward. They can't imagine that in a few days, this humble donkey-riding Messiah will be dead on a cross. There was *zero* expectation of a suffering Messiah. They think they know what their problem is and how to fix it (a warrior King) - but only because they were listening to the world, not to God.

When we welcome Jesus into our congregation, into our lives, what do we expect? We Americans are a pragmatic lot. We want to know how to fix what is wrong. Our theology too often devolves into "if it works, it must be true." But is this all there is to the Gospel? Granted we have problems, but the biblical view is that we often can't name the problems or diagnose them properly, must less put things right. Sin causes us to look at our lives through the lens of this world, rather than the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

On Palm Sunday, we welcome our Lord. How can we help each other to hear our Master's call, to exchange our priorities and ambitions for those given us by God? What are three changes in your own life that you could make, right now, to re-orient your life around Jesus' demands rather than your neighbor's? We ought to be keeping up with Jesus, not the Joneses!