

The King Arrives

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a six-part series

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Luke 19:28–44 (NIV)

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.

³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ”

³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴ They replied, “The Lord needs it.”

³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

³⁸ “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

⁴⁰ “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

⁴¹ As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

John 12:12–15 (NIV)

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³ They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the king of Israel!”

¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:

¹⁵ “Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion;
see, your king is coming,
seated on a donkey’s colt.”

Zechariah 9:9 (NIV)

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Psalms 118:26 (NIV)

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you.

The true story

A millennium before, God had promised King David that one from his line, his house, would sit on the throne of Israel. And now, on the Sunday before Passover, Jesus lays claim to that throne for all to see. He wraps himself in every messianic symbol -- the colt, the cloaks, escorted in through the Eastern Gate -- all it. There was nothing hidden now. But there was more, for in riding into Jerusalem, YHWH had returned to Zion. For God's people, there was to be no king but God.

Once a year we gather to celebrate Palm Sunday. Palms waving, children parading, choirs in full voice. It is always a wonderful and often spectacular Sunday. But it is easy to miss what is going on when Jesus enters Jerusalem. For more than two years, he had been circumspect about his identity and mission. He avoided the big cities in Judea and Galilee. He told people to keep what he had done for them to themselves.

But now, all that is past. Jesus takes every symbol of messiahship, the arriving King of Israel, and wrapped them around himself. No chance for misunderstanding now. He had come to claim his throne. Yes, God's Messiah had arrived. And could Jesus be even more?? Let's begin by briefly painting the picture.

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!

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.

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 to 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 Jesus through Jericho, not far from Jerusalem. There, Jesus had brought salvation even to a hated tax collector named Zacchaeus. 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 did it really mean?*

¹ "Hosanna" means "Save us!"

The arrival

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?

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.

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.

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. For, indeed, God's future had arrived already, but not yet. God's kingdom was both present and coming.

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 witnesses 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 outlive 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.

So, really, who is Jesus?

This is the Palm Sunday question. It was certainly 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 3.² 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:

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

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.

²I 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.

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.³ 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).

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.

³I 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!

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?

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

We continue our study of Isaiah.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This class will not meet on Easter.

We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.