

*After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them,<sup>30</sup> “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.<sup>31</sup> If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ tell him, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ”*

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

*<sup>34</sup> They replied, “The Lord needs it.”*

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

*<sup>37</sup> 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:*

*<sup>38</sup> “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”  
“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”*

*<sup>39</sup> Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”*

*<sup>40</sup> “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (Luke 19:28-40)*

### **This Had to Happen**

Do you ever read Bible stories and wonder why this happened? Today is Palm Sunday. The kids are singing. We’ve passed out palm branches. Every year, we hear this story. But do we know why it happened? Do we understand what it really means? If I had a pop quiz today and asked members from the congregation to stand up and explain what this was all about, would you want me to call on you? Perhaps not. That might just be because you’re shy. But it might be because you’re not sure about the answer. Whether you’re prepared to give a five minute talk on the significance of Palm Sunday or whether you’d prefer I called on someone else, this is a key moment in the life of our Savior. You see, **this had to happen.**

**I. This had to happen to fulfill God’s plan.**

**II. This had to happen to identify the Savior.**

**I.**

For months, Jesus had been moving toward Jerusalem. Again and again, he had told his disciples that the reason they were going there was for him to die. At long last, Jesus had arrived. He came to the villages of Bethany and Bethphage – suburbs of Jerusalem to our modern way of thinking. From there, he sent two of his disciples ahead. Understand that up to this point, Jesus had been walking. But now he instructed his disciples to enter the village and bring back a donkey’s colt for him to ride. He told them exactly where the donkey would be. He told them what to say if and when they were challenged for untying and leading away a donkey that didn’t belong to them. And everything happened exactly as he said it would. They found the donkey and untied it. The owners wanted to know why these strangers were taking it and the disciples answered, **“The Lord needs it.”** Without any further discussion, they let them go.

Was this a miracle? Did Jesus, the Son of God, know that this donkey was there and when the disciples answered as he instructed them, did he use his power to compel its owners to let them go? Or had Jesus arranged all this in advance? Was “The Lord needs it” a code word that let the owners know that these were the men who were supposed to come? We really don’t know. God’s Word doesn’t tell us because what matters here is something far simpler: Jesus made sure that this event came off exactly as it was supposed to happen.

In the Old Testament, God had made a prophecy that the Messiah, the promised Savior and the true king of Israel, would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey’s colt. Now, to us city folk, that might seem like not much of a prophecy. Kings rode into Jerusalem for hundreds of years. How would the people know which one God was talking about? The answer is in the donkey. Kings don’t ride donkeys. They ride stallions. In Israel, they rode mules, which are not the same thing, because Israel is hilly and rocky and mules are uniquely suited to

keep their footing in that kind of terrain. But only people who couldn't afford anything more rode donkeys. It would be like saying that the president would come into town driving a \$500 beater. It just doesn't happen.

But God said that it would. More than that, God said that when the King came he would be gentle and humble. God wasn't picturing a king in silk robes, wearing a crown and accompanied by an honor guard who for a show mounted a donkey. He wasn't talking about a photo op. God was pointing to Jesus, who had humbled himself, who had left behind his majesty as God. The Son of God didn't even have a saddle for his donkey. He sat on his disciples' cloaks. He didn't wear expensive robes and the only crown he ever put on was made of thorns. The truth is, to anybody who passed Jesus on that day, he would've looked like any other poor traveler who had to ride a donkey.

That's where the miracle comes in because the crowds still came out to meet him. Luke calls them a crowd of his disciples – of his followers. Jesus' followers got the ball rolling. They begin to praise him and chant for him. They laid their robes in the road and cut palm branches and spread them before him. But John tells us that the great crowd who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover went out to meet him. During the Passover, the population of Jerusalem swelled dramatically. God moved those people to come out and see him. Even Luke tells us that the Pharisees were there in the crowd. What the crowd shouted was also a part of the miracle. Each of the gospel writers records different parts of the shouts, but they all came from the same place: Psalm 118. The Jews knew that this psalm was a prophecy of the coming king. So when they shouted, **“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”** and **“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”** they were welcoming the Messiah into his own city and fulfilling the prophecy God had given them.

God had set this date to fulfill this prophecy. God had steered the history of the entire world and of the Middle East in particular because this was his time, when he wanted his Son to come into Jerusalem and claim his kingdom. That's exactly what Jesus did that day. He entered as a King coming home to his people. He entered as the Promised Messiah. He entered to fulfill his destiny that day. Jesus came there to die. He knew that the shouts of the crowd were an illusion. He knew that too many of them thought that he was going to kick the Romans out and set up a new Jewish kingdom and eventually conquer the world. But that's not why he came. He knew that they would turn on him before the week was out. But still he came because he had to die before that week was out.

Why did Jesus have to die? Why did the cheering have to stop? Because we needed him to die. Jesus didn't have to come into Jerusalem to be a king. He was a king already. He's the Son of God. He rules all things. But unless he came into Jerusalem that day, as King, he would have to condemn us all to hell because that's what we deserve. Stop and think about it for a moment. Why didn't they welcome him? Because the people wanted something different from what God was sending them. They thought they knew better than God what a Savior should do. When Jesus refused to be that Savior, their leaders had no problem convincing them to ask for his death.

My friends, do you think that we would've done any better? The leaders who opposed him went to synagogue faithfully. Most of the people who cried for his death were there to celebrate the Passover, to celebrate God's love. Most of the people who were disappointed in Jesus thought they knew what God wanted and how they were supposed to live. Does that sound at all familiar? Couldn't those people have been us? We go to church regularly. We celebrate the great Christian holidays, like Easter, next week. Don't we think that we have a pretty good idea what God expects from us and how we're supposed to live? What makes us different from them?

The truth is, my friends, by ourselves, there is no difference. Every one of us was born a sinner. Sinners always think that they're on God's side. Quite often, sinners get angry and offended when they discover that God says something very different from what they think. We are born far more in touch with the moods and the thinking of our society. God has to beat down the opinions we pick up from the unbelievers all around us. It is sheer sinful pride that thinks we would've done better. We're sinners and we deserve to spend eternity in hell for all the times and all the ways that we imagined that what we think and feel is what God thinks and feels.

But Jesus rode into Jerusalem to die for us and for all sinners everywhere. That's why he arranged not just this ride into Jerusalem but this whole week of teaching and preaching and confronting his enemies. This was the one week when Jesus' enemies did not want to kill him. They wanted to wait until all these crowds went home and they could get rid of him quietly. But Jesus forced them to kill him that week so that he could face his Father's justice for us.

Jesus had to face God the Father's justice for our sin and unbelief. He had to suffer hell. He had to die. He had to experience everything that a whole world of sinners deserves – six and half billion sinners are in this world just today, plus all those who went before us and all those who will follow. Jesus had to die and pay for them all and in process he died and paid for you and me, for our pride, for our false beliefs, for our anger and offense when we discover what God really says. And his death took all that sin away. This entrance into Jerusalem was the first act in that death. **This had to happen to fulfill God's plan.**

## II.

When the crowds sang and shouted, quoting from Psalm 118, the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, **“Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”** Have you ever been somewhere when somebody else's kids were acting like hoodlums and you just wanted to tell their parents to deal with them? If you have, you may have an inkling of how the Pharisees felt. To them, this whole procession was bad behavior. The Pharisees knew exactly what this shouting meant. They knew the prophecies from the Old Testament that said a Messiah was coming. They just didn't believe it was Jesus.

They were sure that any self-respecting rabbi would be offended to have people call him the Messiah. But Jesus did not shut the crowd up. Instead, he rebuked the Pharisees: **“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”** This is one of the earliest lessons that I remember from Sunday school because I remember puzzling over what it meant. And when I understood that Jesus was saying the stones lying on the ground who cry out, I formed a cartoonish image in my head – which is still there whenever I hear or read this verse – of those stones opening their mouths and crying out.

Jesus was totally serious here. If the crowd would've refused to sing praises to their Savior, God would've made those stones cry out – and maybe it would even have resembled the cartoon image in my head. In the end, he didn't have to, but God was prepared to do whatever was necessary to announce that the king had come. That's what this event means. In a sense, you can say that this entrance was not only the fulfillment of prophecy, but it was also a prophecy in itself, a prophecy that's reflected in the reading from Isaiah that we heard a few minutes ago. When he comes back, Jesus will come as a king and as Isaiah said, every knee will bow to him. The whole world will welcome him as King and Savior. This entrance into Jerusalem was God underlining the final act of Jesus' work.

God did that because he knew how hard it was going to be to see Jesus for a king by the end of that week. He wouldn't look like a king when he was scourged and bloody. He wouldn't look like a king when he was on trial. He certainly wouldn't look like a king when he was nailed to a cross while his enemies taunted him. So God gave one clue after another of who he was. Pilate nailed the sign to the cross which said, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The soldiers put a crown of thorns on his head. And Jesus marched into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the ancient prophecy and God turned the whole city out to hear the shouts of welcome.

Jesus is the King. And God wanted every person in the city that day to know it. When he rose, God wanted all these people to understand who he is so that on Judgment Day, they could welcome him with joy, rather than welcoming him as condemned sinners who have no choice but praise and then go to hell. Only God knows how many of those people understood the signs that day. But God also recorded all this for us because sometimes it's hard to see Jesus as a king in a world that mocks him, in a world where sin and sorrow inflict endless pain even on us. God wants us to know and understand that this is our Savior. The only way that anyone will even know him is through the message. God was preaching the gospel message that day. That gospel is the power of God. **This had to happen to identify the Savior!**

God wants us to know. God wants us to trust him. God wants us to live. So he sent his Son to die that day. He organized all of human history so that it would reach its climax at the end of that week. And he has run the entire world since so that this message would reach us – and every other Christian on earth. All this had to happen for you and for me. Amen.