

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!*

*Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!*

*See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

<sup>10</sup> *I will take away the chariots from Ephraim  
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,  
and the battle bow will be broken.*

*He will proclaim peace to the nations.*

*His rule will extend from sea to sea*

*and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9, 10)*

### What's Real?

How many glasses of water have you had today? If you're going to make the eight glasses that every person is supposed to drink every day, you might want to get started. My guess is that almost no one here today is going to drink that much water. And that's OK because the idea that you're supposed to drink eight glasses of water every day is a myth. It's just not true. Now, it is true that adult males need to take in at least two and half liters of fluids every day. But most of that actually comes through your food. You do need to avoid dehydrating yourself. But for most people, drinking when you're thirsty is good enough. So why do so many people think that this myth is true? Back in 1945, there was a recommendation that said that people need to take in 2.5 liters of fluids a day. No one paid any attention to the next sentence that said food provides a major share of it. It took on a life of its own – just like people believe that we only use ten percent of our brains or shaving your head makes your hair grow faster or eating turkey makes you drowsy. None of those things are true. But people say them so often that we believe them.

What's real? It can be hard to tell. Sometimes, it doesn't matter much – very few people have been hurt by the belief that we only use ten percent of our brains. But sometimes when people believe things that aren't true, terrible things result. I read this past week that a woman in Spain died from a kind of acupuncture where they use bee stings instead of needles. Why would anyone do that? Because some famous people in Hollywood are promoting it as a cure all. The scary thing is that the people who believe these things are not stupid. It's just hard to know what's real. Palm Sunday illustrates as much as any day of the church year how easy it is to be fooled. Jesus riding into Jerusalem five days before he died sent a message. But did his people understand it? Five hundred years before he rode in, the prophet Zechariah told God's people what it would mean. But to understand his message, you have to think about that basic question: **what's real?**

#### I.

Zechariah said a king was coming. **What's real? What makes a real king?** Zechariah said, **“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you.”** Of course, this is a prophecy not of just any king, but of the Messiah King, the promised descendant of King David who would rule over his people forever. In the Old Testament, kings made an official entrance into Jerusalem on the day they were crowned. Zechariah was looking forward to a day like that. But the funny thing is, there was no king during Zechariah's lifetime. He lived after the exile. Seventy years after God's people were dragged off to Babylon, God let them return home. But they were not an independent kingdom anymore. They were part of the Persian Empire.

But it was natural for Zechariah to point back to when they used to have kings and picture the coming King in those terms. God continued to use the prophecy of a coming King for the Savior he had promised. But what kind of king would he be? What would make him a king? Clearly, part of it was being descended from King David, and that was true of Jesus. But Zechariah points to other things, too. He says that the king would be righteous. Zechariah and his people had seen what happened when the ruler of God's chosen people worshipped idols – he led that people astray and they were destroyed. So when the true King came, he would

have to be better than the evil kings of Judah and Israel, better even than the best kings, like David and Hezekiah. He would have to be righteous in God's sight. So Jesus was sinless and holy.

And he would bring salvation. Now, all through history, there have been kings and presidents who saved their countries. Many people would argue that Abraham Lincoln did that for our country. Without a doubt, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, many people were looking for someone to finally throw off the Romans and set up an independent kingdom of Israel again. But that's not the salvation Jesus came to bring. You know that, because you know how that week ended: this same crowd shouted at him again, not crying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" but "Crucify him! Crucify him!" But that was God's plan. The true King came to die because that's how he saves us.

God did a miracle on that first Palm Sunday. He caused the Jewish people to welcome Jesus as the King he was – even though the vast majority of them didn't believe in him. God did that because he knew that Jesus would die on Friday. He knew that his followers would think that he had lost and that their cause was defeated. God also knew that his enemies would think that they had won. Now, they would remember that he said he was going to rise. But they thought all they had to do was guard the tomb so no one could claim he was anything but dead. Jesus did not look like a king when they pulled him off the cross and threw him into a tomb with almost no burial rites at all. So God gathered his people and caused them to welcome him as the promised Son of David so that we can see who he really was.

Even when he rode in, Jesus didn't look like one of the historic kings of Israel. Zechariah said that he would be gentle and that he would ride on a donkey – he would be humble. Kings didn't ride donkeys. Horses and mules and donkeys were the vehicles of that day. If you think of a great stallion as the Ferrari of that era, a donkey was a beat up, old pick-up truck. No real king would ever ride one, certainly not for his official entry into Jerusalem. But that's the sign God gave for the real King. The people recognized it. But even the donkey didn't make him the real King – it was just the sign. What did? Being the Son of David. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they cried. He was the heir. And he was more. They cried, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" He was the Son of God made flesh. He was the Maker of the Universe who knelt down and lived our lives so that he can rescue us. That's what made him the real King. That's what God designed Palm Sunday to show.

## II.

That truth is so important that God recorded Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem in all four gospels. Today, even much of the visible church is losing sight of what Jesus' death really meant. It wasn't just an example of self-sacrifice and love. It wasn't just a tragedy that shows how unjust our world can be. It wasn't just a moving story that should make us want to make our world better. It was God's own sacrifice designed to win us life and peace. And Zechariah pictures it in terms of world peace. But what does he mean by that?

### **What's real? What makes real peace?**

When Hollywood makes a big Civil War movie or a World War II movie, in the end, the enemy is defeated and the soldiers go home and peace reigns. But is it really that simple? If you know your history, you know it's not. Reconstruction followed the Civil War and that included the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and Indian Wars and nationwide labor strikes. Of course, World War II was followed by the Cold War and a nuclear arms race. Peace is hard to come by in this world. What does it really look like?

Zechariah pictured the true King coming to Jerusalem and bringing peace. He said, **"I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."** He pictures peace for God's people and peace for the nations, the gentiles. The King of Israel would give peace to us gentiles. And he would rule from sea to sea and from the River Euphrates to the ends of the earth. What does God mean by these words? Is he promising us an era of international peace with Jesus ruling? Lots of people have taken these words that way. Before World War I, most Americans thought that it meant that peace and progress were unstoppable. The world would get better and better and then Jesus would come back, like God putting a cherry on top of an iced cream Sunday, and he would rule a perfect world forever. But then World War I came. People died by the millions and suddenly the unstoppable march of progress didn't look so possible. So ever since, people have imagined the world getting worse and worse until Jesus comes and sets up a new kingdom in Jerusalem and reigns there for a thousand years, until the final battle between good and evil at Armageddon.

But neither of those things is what Zechariah is talking about. How do I know that? Because our gospel lesson makes clear when this prophecy was fulfilled: on that spring day in Jerusalem two thousand years ago when Jesus sent his disciples to get a donkey. He didn't even have a saddle so they threw their cloaks on it for him to sit on. He didn't have an army or a red carpet or the city fathers to escort him. Fishermen were his honor guard. And crowds of pilgrims who had come for the Passover went ahead and behind and shouted all those wonderful things. Jesus' enemies asked him to make the crowd stop. And he told them that if the people stopped, the stones would cry out and welcome the true King to his capital city.

That was the fulfillment. He came to die and rise. And that is what gives us peace. That is what establishes his kingdom forever. Jesus did not come to bring world peace, at least not until this world ends. He came to give us salvation, to give us victory over death and hell and the guilt that haunts our hearts. He came to claim us as his people and to protect us from all the horrors of this life and bring us home to be with him. Jesus came to give us a real and greater peace than any kingdom on this earth can ever have.

You and I need that peace. We need it when life hurts. We need it when we watch the news and wonder what's happened to our country. We need it when North Korea vows to build nuclear weapons. We need it when the economy wobbles on the threat of a trade war and we all hold our breath wondering what's coming next. Even if nuclear war comes, even if our economy collapses, even if the United States ceases to exist and we know only poverty and pain for the rest of our lives, Jesus is still our Savior and our King. He will watch over us and care for us and bring us home.

How do we know that? Because he died for us. He paid all that we owe so that we don't have to face hell and so that we can defeat death. My friends, we are sinners. We deserve all the evil that comes on us. If you don't agree with me, just think about that last time you came up short as a husband or a wife. Just think about the last thing you did as a parent that makes you feel guilty. If you have adult children, just think about the ways you failed them when they were growing up and how that hurts you. If you have elderly parents, just think about how much more they deserve than what you give them. We are sinners. Every time we fail each other, we fail God. The true King should come to us with a whip and cast us into hell.

But instead he rode into Jerusalem to die and pay for all those sins. He rode into Jerusalem knowing that he would suffer our hell on the cross and die our death. He rode into Jerusalem planning to pay for our sins and die our death and rise on Easter Sunday morning. That resurrection tells us we are bought and paid for. Our sin is gone. We are holy and perfect in God's sight and we will live with him in joy forever. We will conquer death and rise to live in a new and perfect world forever. And that resurrection tells us that until Jesus comes back, he will watch over us and care for us because he loves us.

All that gives us a kind of peace that this world can never know. But it is the truest and most real peace there is. It is the peace of God – the end of fear and guilt and the expectation of new and better things to come. What's real? It can be hard to know in this world. But one thing never changes: Jesus is real. His promises are real. His love is real. Cling to them today and every day. Amen.