

*As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,<sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.<sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”*

<sup>4</sup> *This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:*

<sup>5</sup> *“Say to the Daughter of Zion,  
‘See, your king comes to you,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”*

<sup>6</sup> *The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.<sup>7</sup> They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.<sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.<sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,*

*“Hosanna to the Son of David!”*

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

*“Hosanna in the highest!”*

<sup>10</sup> *When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”*

<sup>11</sup> *The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matthew 21:1-11)*

### Who is This?

Have you ever seen that bit that Jay Leno does where he shows people pictures of someone famous and asks them to identify that person? He always manages to find somebody who hasn't got a clue who that person is. What I find interesting about that is what it means to identify that famous person. Jay Leno would accept just the name – Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden or whoever. But when we identify a person like that, we usually say more. We say what makes them famous. If one of our teachers showed a picture of one of those people and asked, “Who is this?” they would want the kids to know more than just the name. They would want them to be able to say that that's the secretary of state or the vice-president. Our names only have meaning when we connect them to the people we are. We see that this morning in our gospel lesson. We have before us a story that we hear every year on Palm Sunday. It's the account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem. But right at the end of Matthew's account of it, God puts this event into focus for us. The whole city of Jerusalem was put into an uproar over this event and the people asked, “Who is this?” The answer resonates from time to eternity. **Who is this?**

#### I.

The people could've simply answered, “It's Jesus!” and that would've been enough for us. But that's not the answer that Matthew records. He writes, **“The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’”** In his day, the name Jesus was fairly common among the Jews. They had to specify which Jesus they were talking about. **Who is this? It's the prophet from Nazareth.**

Notice they said *“the prophet from Nazareth.”* Jesus was the only prophet who ever came from that fishing village way up north. But three years of preaching and teaching and doing miracles had made Jesus the most famous person in Israel. His miracles, his unique ability to make the truths God taught connect with the common man and his obvious concern for even the most unimportant members of society had convinced the people that Jesus was indeed a prophet.

A prophet is someone who speaks the message God sends him to speak. God sent many prophets in the Old Testament and their messages varied. Moses' message gave hope to slaves in Egypt. Isaiah's message called God's people to repent and warned of exile. Ezekiel spoke to people in exile and reminded them that God had not forgotten them. Elijah dealt with Ahab. Samuel dealt with Saul and David. Over a thousand years passed from the time that Moses lived until the time that Malachi lived. God tailored the message he gave his prophets to each one's time and circumstances. Yet, in a deeper sense, all the Old Testament prophets spoke the same message. They proclaimed the good news about the coming Savior. Beginning with Moses and ending

with John the Baptist, every prophet prepared God's people to recognize Jesus. Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, came to fulfill every promise God had made going back beyond even the time of Moses all the way to the Garden of Eden.

Every action Jesus took on Palm Sunday spoke to God's people. He came in conscious fulfillment of the prophecy that God had given through Zechariah, the second last prophet of the Old Testament. He said that the King would come to Jerusalem riding on a donkey's colt. So Jesus sent his disciples to get a colt that he knew was waiting for him. Now, was this a miracle? Did Jesus use his almighty power to put that colt there? Or did he use his knowledge of all things to find a colt and then use his power to allow the disciples to take it? Or did he simply make arrangements in advance like any other human beings and then send the disciples to get it? The Bible doesn't tell us. What it does tell us is that Jesus made sure the donkey was there for this all important event.

Then when he came into the city, crowds came out to shout and cheer. This certainly seems like a miracle. People rode donkeys into Jerusalem every day. Jesus himself had entered Jerusalem many times before. But on this day, when he rode this donkey into the city, people turned out by the thousands to go ahead of him and behind him and to shout. The whole city turned out – and understand that this was Passover week. Jews from all over the world would've been in Jerusalem that day to celebrate. They all turned out to ask, **“Who is this?”** And they all heard the answer, **“This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”** God made all this happen to declare that his greatest messenger had arrived. Jesus didn't ride in just for the benefit of the people who lived in Jerusalem or for the pilgrims who were there that year. Jesus rode into Jerusalem so that you and I recognize him as our prophet, as our messenger from God.

Do we always appreciate how important that is? Think about how hard it is to get the truth in our lives. When I visit people in the hospital, I often find them confused. One doctor came in and said that they might need an operation and another doctor came in a half hour later and said they might be going home that day. What's true? The doctors don't know themselves until they get together and hash it out. Think about politics, think about family crises, think about legal issues and finances and conflict among neighbors. So often in our lives, we can't know what's true. We don't know what advice will be good for us and what advice will bring disaster. Sometimes, that keeps us up late at night. But in the midst of all that confusion and contradiction, the prophet from Nazareth comes into Jerusalem and reminds us that there is one truth that we can always hold onto. There is one promise that cannot fail us. Jesus comes in the name of the Father and offers us truth. We can trust in him to save us, to care for us, to be with us in all those difficult and confusing things. And if we can't figure out the things of this life, we're lost when it comes to the great truths of God. But the prophet from Nazareth came to bring us light and truth from God.

Now, that doesn't mean Jesus is going to answer all our questions. We will still wrestle and wonder. But it does give us hope and confidence here. It does give us comfort when we don't know which way to turn, because God says that none of those things that confuse us can possibly defeat us. It does calm our hearts because we know that all the uncertainty and confusion of this life is temporary. The final destination is still coming. When we reach it, we will be at peace. All our wrestling and all our stress will be over in the life to come. We will reach that life because Jesus has spoken God's message of love and forgiveness to us.

## II.

That message will not fail because Jesus is the point of all the messages God has sent. All the Old Testament pointed forward to him. All the New Testament points back to what he has done and forward to what he will do. **Who is this? He is the Messiah King.**

Ever since the time of King David, God spoke of the Savior who was coming as the true King of Israel. The prophet Zechariah brought that theme to a climax. Matthew quotes him as saying, **“Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”** Zion is another name of Jerusalem. The Daughter of Zion is a poetic way of speaking of the people of Zion. So, Zechariah said, “Give this message to the people of Jerusalem.” Of course, that is literally what happened. The people of Jerusalem heard that their King had come. But here the Daughter of Zion also stands for the whole people of God. God wants us to see that when Jesus came, he was more than just another prophet. He was the true King Israel had been waiting for since God promised King David that a King was coming who would rule over his house forever.

This King was gentle. In the ancient world, kings were generals who commanded armies in battle. Their purpose was to defend their people. Being gentle didn't have a lot of use on the battle field. Yet Jesus was gentle. He did ride into Jerusalem as a warrior who was about to take on the greatest enemy of all: the devil. Jesus was less than a week away from the ultimate battle for the souls of the entire world. But still he was gentle.

And he was humble. He rode a donkey. Kings of Israel did not ride donkeys. Sometimes they rode stallions. But their animal of choice was actually a mule because Israel is a rocky, hilly country and mules are extremely sure footed. But donkeys were what peasants rode. Jesus rode the mount of the poorest, the most insignificant people in Israel. Today, we're accustomed to presidents and leaders making a show of being one of the people. But two thousand years ago, kings went out of their way to show that they weren't commoners. Most of them claimed to be descendants from gods. But Jesus, who really is the Son of God, identified himself with the poor and the lowly because that's who he came to save.

Yet, there was a kind of pomp and circumstance on this day. It turned upside down all the traditions of royalty. Instead of armed guards, Jesus came with fishermen and Passover pilgrims. Instead of a red carpet, people laid their cloaks and palm branches in front of him. But this was the official entry of the true King of Israel. It did have an air of celebration and a unique kind of pomp and circumstance. The people shouted: **"Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"** Hosanna means "Save!" To this day, Jewish people shout it as a welcome for the Messiah. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" comes from Psalm 118. It's a promise of the Savior's coming. Jesus rode into Jerusalem and God moved the people to welcome him as the Messiah.

Sadly, at the end of the week, their cries would turn to "Crucify him! Crucify him!" But both of those cries do show who he was. Jesus entered Jerusalem to die for us, and for all people. During this time of Lent, we spend time remembering our sins. We all need to ask ourselves about the purity and sincerity of our hearts. How many of us would've shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" on Sunday and then shouted "Crucify him!" on Friday? We'd all like to believe that we would've done better. And maybe we would have. But each one of us is a sinner. Each of us has a sinful nature that loves to get caught up in emotion, but hates to stop and examine itself.

How often, my friends, are the Sundays that we gather here like that Sunday two thousand years ago? How often do we leave this house and go home and live like we were never here? How often do we betray our Savior during the week? It's tempting to say that we would never do that. But never is a very dangerous word. Peter never thought that he would deny Jesus. The people in that crowd never thought that they would turn on Jesus. But both things happened. How often do our words and actions during the week make it impossible to tell the difference between us and unbelievers? Every moment of selfishness, every act of cruelty, every lie, every boast, every curse that falls from our lips betrays our Savior.

Are we guilty? Of course we are. We're sinners, every one. We deserve death and hell. But that's exactly why Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day. By the end of the week, he was going to force his enemies to kill him. They wanted to wait until all those pilgrims went home. But God chose the time. This triumphant entry into Jerusalem, this parody of human pomp and circumstance, this was the official beginning of the end, of the fulfillment of all he came here to do. On Friday, he died and he paid for all that sin and betrayal that we just can't erase from our lives. He died and paid for all the ways that we forget what we did and said here during the week. He died and paid because we all have a sinner inside us who desperately wants to be free of God. Then he rose and wiped all that sin away. He did what only he could do: he won the battle against the devil, against hell, against sin and death for you and me.

That's why we come here every year on Palm Sunday. We come to celebrate what he rode into Jerusalem to do. That's why we will gather again on Thursday and on Friday and especially one week from today on Easter Sunday. Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, the Messiah King has come. He has made us his. Amen.