

This is Palm Sunday and as is clear so far in the course of the service, this is the day the king arrived. [It is] critically important in the life of Israel, critically important in the life of the church. We will be looking primarily at Luke 19:38-44. Here is one of the accounts of the arrival of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem. I think that I will let you read that section. You want to pick it specifically at verses 41-44; I am going to land there in just a couple of minutes.

Step back for a moment [from the text]. There are many compelling scenes in the life of Jesus. A number come to mind and I suspect you have a number that are particularly meaningful to you. It must have been quite a sight to see Him walking on the water! Wouldn't love to have been in the boat or maybe on the shore and watching Him walking across the waters? It would have been surreal. Or what of the scene of Jesus entering the temple. The thing that always amazes me, He enters the temple and then when He sees the money changers [the scriptures] say he takes and makes a whip and then He takes it and He drives them out of the temple. That would have been a moment to watch, a powerful scene, not one that we normally associate with the Lord Jesus. Or how about that other scene that has equal power, when Jesus is standing and the Pharisees come with the woman caught in adultery and you watch as each of the men leaves the scene from the oldest to the youngest because Jesus had said the one without sin [should] throw the first stone.

Today of course is another one of those powerful scenes that says so much to us about the Lord Jesus Christ and about us. This is the scene where Jesus is riding on the donkey, the foal of a donkey coming down the Mount of Olive and then entering into the gates of the City of Jerusalem. Along the way the disciples as well as the crowd from the City, and we are told at one particularly the children are shouting out “Hosanna, hosanna!” But if you do a telescopic lens and you zero in on our Lord Jesus riding the donkey, He and He alone in all of that gathered multitude was weeping. *“When He drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, ‘Would that you, even you would have known the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes, for the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. They will not leave one stone upon another because you did not know the time of your visitation.’”*

Reflecting for a moment on that brief description, I think we are probably not so surprised that Jesus would weep. We know something of His heart, the deep longing that He has that you and I, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve would respond to God's love for us. The whole story of scripture is that again and again and again the Lord tries to penetrate the hardened hearts, to bend the stiff necks of people and get them to grab and take in the reality of His love. So the weeping, though it surprises us because of the contrast with the crowd is nevertheless something that resonates with us. But then the words of Jesus: they are shocking, because what He says is, “Too late; too late!” Hear it again: *“Would that you, even you would have known the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden. . .”* The consequence of that hiding actually occurs, if you know your scriptures and history, 70 years after this event. The Roman imperial armies surround the city of Jerusalem and they do exactly what Jesus describes here. They level it and they slaughter as many as a million people.

The dominant picture in most people's minds for Palm Sunday is of Jesus riding on a donkey, the foal of a donkey with the crowd loudly cheering and all is joy and hallelujah. In many ways we can look upon this entrance of Jesus into the city as the crowning moment of His ministry to the Jews. He has blessed these people with countless

miracles: healings, deeply stirring preaching, remarkable challenges to the venal and corrupt high priests and government officials. Now this indomitable spirit, this remarkable man comes riding boldly and openly into the city and everybody knows what is happening. They are saying, “Here comes the predicted king. This is the heir of King David. This is the one who will sit upon the throne!” That is what all of that is about. And what hopes it undoubtedly stirred! This is something that has been predicted for a long time, in fact for multiple thousands of years. It began with God’s words to Eve: Genesis 3:17, “Someday a child of yours, born from you, will crush the head of the serpent even as that child’s heel is wounded by the serpent.” Later on the promise comes to Abraham. We have looked extensively at Abraham’s life as a congregation [in recent messages]. The promise is given in Genesis 12:1-3. At its heart is that a son will be given and through that son every family upon the face of the earth will be blessed. So the promise is gathered up. We looked a little earlier at the second Psalm where we are told of the Lord setting His anointed on the throne of Israel and establishing the rule of His Son over all the nations of the earth. David the great king himself picks up that same understanding in Psalm 110, often cited by the apostles in the New Testament. He says this in verses 1 and 4, *“The Lord says to my lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. . . The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind: you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”* These are the anticipations in the hearts and the minds of the Jews as they see Jesus riding upon this donkey into the city of Jerusalem. Three hundred years after David writes his Psalm 110, Micah the prophet in 5:4 says that this man will be born in the city of Bethlehem. If you know your Christmas story, when the magi came and they said, “We understand a king has been born to the Jews. Do you have any idea where he might be born?” The High priests in the city of Jerusalem knew exactly where he was going to be born. They said, “Sure, [he will be born] in Bethlehem.” That was Micah’s prediction: *“Oh Bethlehem of Ephrathah, you are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is born to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”* Finally, we also read this morning that the prophet Zechariah who, another 200 years after Micah foresaw the coming of the Anointed One coming into Jerusalem on a donkey – not a war horse, but a donkey, a symbol of peace. *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* Zechariah goes on to describe a kingdom that is far greater than that of David and Solomon. He says this: *“I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”*

What you want to do is you want to take – that is just a few of the prophecies – what you want to do is take the prophecies and put them into your consciousness and put yourself along the edge of the road and then look out and say to yourself, “Here comes Jesus. He is the One who is going to make real, to put into historical reality all of this wealth of God’s promise.” What would you feel like? How would it grab you? It would be powerful. If you believed those things it would be powerful. You would feel like this was the dawn of a new age. That this was the time when all the past sorrows would be shoved aside and all past wrongs were going to be righted and finally justice and truth and goodness and mercy would sit upon the throne and the end of human sorrows and troubles and all the chaos had left them now a captured and oppressed people.

Hope: I have often struggled in my mind as I thought about, what is the theme of Palm Sunday, what is it that is the defining core [of this day’s events]? It is hope. It is hope! But of course the puzzling thing, if you want, the thing that should grab our minds is the realization that hope is not a singular reality. What I mean is that hope is

complex. Indeed hope varies according to the one who is hoping. The heart condition of the one whose hopes are rising will say a great deal about where those hopes take them in the days to come. So I want to think about that just a little bit.

Jesus' own disciples, both the inner circle of 12 and that group of some 120 people who were there praying after His death and resurrection, these hoped for the immediate establishment of the kingdom of Israel under Jerusalem. We are told that explicitly. This is the long awaited royal son. In [Luke 19:11] Luke writes, *“AS they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they [His disciples] supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.”* That is what is on their minds. If you know your scriptures pretty well you know that the mother of James and John, two of the most intimate associates of Jesus, actually comes to Jesus and she says, “By the way, Jesus, can I ask you a favor?” And Jesus says, “Yes.” And she says, “When You come into Your kingdom would you mind if you let one of my sons sit on Your right hand and one on Your left?” [Those would be] the two most powerful positions in the entire kingdom beside You? Would that be ok? What Jesus does is He turns to the two of them, James and John, and says, “You haven't got the slightest idea of what you are asking for. Do you think you can drink my cup?” And they say, “Yes.” That is a message for another day.

You have to remember that though in closest association with Jesus, these are still not Spirit filled men. They are not yet born again through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. [They] can't be. So that helps us perhaps to understand some of the limitation that they struggle with. They do not fully understand that the true ministry of Jesus is to die for the sins of humanity and to provide the means for a true and eternal reconciliation with God. That is the true business of our Lord Jesus Christ. They still think He is primarily involved in setting up a kingdom. So they are trapped inside the limited historical experience of Israel. All they can see is that the coming of the Messiah is going to answer all the Israel problems and create a world in which Israel is number 1. That's going to be it. Can we identify with this? How many of us that it is extremely difficult for us to believe that truly saved people are not white middle class Americans? Let me put it this way: do you know that not all Christians like potluck? There is an assumption and I believe that most of us recognize this, there is an assumption: I am that if you were to talk to [our former missionaries in Bangladesh], there is an assumption. Many missionaries that went out from Britain and America in the 19th century assumed that once you became a Christian you would sing all of our gospel songs and you would dress right, like people did in Manchester or in Pittsburg, even if you happened to be in the Central African Republic, which not quite the same climate. But it is hard to escape the controlling power of our own experience. It requires something remarkable, and that is the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

It was a day of great hope. As Jesus rode down the road under the sun and into the great City hope filled the hearts of crowd. Now we are going to turn and look at a different group. What were the hopes of the crowd? I think we would be on fair ground to say that their hopes did rise even to the level of the disciples. For them Jesus was fundamentally a miracle worker, one who multiplied a few loaves and fish to feed a multitude. That was worth hanging onto. He was one who healed the diseases of the sick, he restored sight to the blind, he mended the lame. Over and over again when we read the Gospels we are told that as soon as Jesus arrived everyone in the neighborhood began bringing the sick and the lame and the maimed, any way that they were falling short [of full health], they brought them to Jesus. At one point Jesus said to His disciples, “I've got to get out of here and go to the next town because that is what I was sent to do.” But the people wanted to be healed. Can you understand that

desire? You bet you can. How many have prayed for the physical healing of someone? Everybody in this room I hope, of course! So we understand the inner compulsion, we understand the leaping fire of hope: “Oh man, what if this guy is on the throne? He is here always! What a pilgrimage of the broken can come to the city and receive the blessing of healing and restoration and go out again...healthy, strong.” That is worth thinking about.

They anticipated that somehow this would be the one to end their troubles. How they longed to be rid of the Roman overlords! How they longed to be rid of the corrupt priests who ran the temple and made themselves wealthy. For them I think the coming of Jesus into the city was rather like the circus parade, an afternoon’s happy occupation whose continuance was wholly dependent on whether or not the “big tents” went up the next day. If we track through the concluding chapters of the four Gospel, we know that when no tents went up, when nothing happened, hope was gone. Now beloved, there is a very significant dynamic and the dynamic is as powerful as the hope that is stirred. When hope is disappointed, resentment takes its place. You might, then in considering that you might say to yourself, “If I think about it I can hear already the foreshadowing echo of the shouts, “Crucify Him!” “My hope is shattered, my joy has been flattened: crucify!” I suspect that if we were to let the Spirit of God examine our own hearts and minds and reflect upon our own experience of times in which perhaps people have deeply disappointed us we might understand the power of that resentment which rises up. Shattered hopes bring bitter hearts.

Jesus also is hopeful as He rides into the city. But Jesus’ hope is of a different quality. Jesus does not entertain vague anticipations. For Him surely hope is faith’s forward look. Jesus looks forward not according, as I made the distinction some weeks ago, not according to the difference between His desires or His wishes – you know later on when He is in the Garden of Gethsemane, He says, “You know Father, it is not My wish to do this. If there is, if this cup could be removed, that would be My desire. But it is Your will that I want to do, not my desire. Jesus’ hope is the future according to the promises of God. This is why it is important for us to know the promises of God. It is important for us to know this stuff.

If Jesus is going to gain power, then it will be the kind of power that reflects the character of God. If Jesus is going to establish a kingdom, it is going to be a kingdom that reflects the purposes and character of God. That is extremely important for us to always remember. That is one reason why Jesus’ tears do not in fact contradict His hope. As was mentioned before, Jesus weeps. He weeps even for those who reject Him. He weeps even for those who deny Him, who scorn Him. He weeps you do realize even for those who will take the nails and pound them into the hands, His hands, that rest against the wood, His cross. He weeps. But this does not contradict His hope. Jesus enters the city full of hope because He is also entering the city fully prepared to do all that the Father had asked Him to do for a people for the Father’s own possession. We are told this in John 12:47-50 and 14:31,

“If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me...I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”

Jesus’ hope is grounded in His internal awareness and commitment that He is acting in full obedience and submission to God the Father. That is what ensures the success of what He is doing. It makes no difference – for

His certainty of success – it makes no difference if everybody stands along the road and says “Hallelujah, hallelujah, hosanna” or if everybody stands in the crowd and says, “Crucify, crucify, crucify!” It makes no difference to Jesus in this sense, “I will do what the Father wants me to do; I will say what the Father wants me to say; that is the path that will carry Me through the future and to the success of the Father’s purpose. That is what demonstrates that I love the Father.

There is obvious application to us: for those who view Jesus through the lens of what He will accomplish on the cross as He enters the city, it is the glorious life-giving light of grace, the triumph of life over death, of hope over despair. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the greatest of all things, just the beginning of this magnificent act by God on our behalf. So it should stir us deeply with joy. But if you view Jesus through the lens not of the cross, not of Jesus’ work, then we realize that we are left with our own sin and we face of God on our own.

Not all who observed Jesus enter the city were glad and joined into the celebration. The Pharisees who prided themselves as the masters of the Law objected to Jesus as one who set aside the Law and challenged their authority. They saw the entire episode as a kind of embarrassment, an unruly outburst by unworthy people which needed to be brought under control. So they turned to Jesus and said, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples. They are making a big ruckus and a big mess and it is not a good thing.” Jesus answers them and He says, *“I tell you if these were silent the very stones would cry out.”* Do you think God was excited about Jesus riding into the city? Do we think the angels were excited about Jesus riding into the city? They were excited. They knew, they knew exactly where the road was taking Him, but all of them were willing that that price would be paid in order that the end would be achieved. So as the crowd and the disciples were right to shout their hosannas so should we be. If we were to go back and sing those songs again, Tom, I hope that we would be able to pick those songs again and sing them with an overflowing energy of heart and mind: hosanna, hosanna, here comes the One! Down the road, through the city, to the cross, then the tomb and then up!

The choice that we face on Palm Sunday is not to dismiss hope and joy but rather it is to choose which hope fills our hearts with joy. The importance of this decision, this choice, cannot be too greatly stressed. For the triumphal entry is not a standalone event. The shouts soon fade, the crowd melts away and powerful forces are now at work. In the playing out of the hopes which brought such varied joy, the story of the days to come is one of many betrayals and the singular faithfulness of Jesus. The story of the days to come reaches far back, long before Jesus’ arrival. That is the story of the betrayal by the religious establishment in Jerusalem. That was by both the Pharisees and the religious leaders of the people, the Sadducees, the ruling elite. They had no hope in Jesus. Their hope instead was in themselves. Their hope was that they might contain Jesus and at the appropriate moment might eliminate Jesus. The Pharisees began well, possibly as a reform movement under Ezra, the man who is attributed with establishing the synagogue and the systematic reading and commentary on the Law during the Babylonian exile. We are told this in Ezra 7:10, *“Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do and to teach its statutes and rules in Israel.”* Does that sound like us? It sounds like me; I am a Presbyterian. That is what Presbyterians do. How many know where the Presbyterian church is today? [It is] stumbling, deeply apostate, in rebellion against the Lord; rewriting the Word of God. Pharisees. Earning their own righteousness. Never assume that what the scriptures talk about is distant from ourselves. It is not.

Somewhere along the line the Pharisees fell in love with their own superiority, grew contemptuous of the crowd and saw wealth and privilege as their due. For them, finally, their privileges and comforts were more important than any truth from God. Actually, if you listen to them, they could not imagine that any truth from God could ever put in question their privilege and power. I believe there are many people who call themselves Christians in America today that are in exactly that state of mind. “There is no possibility that my life could be criticized by the word of God. I am a very fine person and I well deserve all that I have. I give much to others just to prove it.” We know some of these people.

The crowd also betrayed Jesus. For the crowd was not really excited about Jesus. What they were excited about, what their hopes were focused upon was the power that Jesus appeared to have in the world. Jesus wept for the crowd as He rode into the city for He knew that the crowd was both blind and deaf to the truth of God, blind and deaf to His true identity, blind and deaf to the purposes of God. He knew in fact that the crowd did not love or care for God at all. It just loved and cared for itself and it just wanted God as an asset for its own well-being. I don't need to talk about that in terms of American Christianity today. There are large swathes, multiple churches that preach exactly that message: “God is here for you to be blessed you as you desire to be blessed. Not much attention is paid at all to the purposes and the character of God and our submission to Him as His servants. Oh boy what a day the future brings. So in John 6:23-26 we read, *“Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”* It is important for us to understand what was going on there. When Jesus says the crowd is not seeking him because they saw the signs He does not mean they failed to notice that He performed a miracle. That is why they were there. They knew He performed a miracle. They were all excited about it. What the crowd did not see was that the miracle was pointing to Jesus as something more than just a miracle worker. But they were not looking for anything else. They were looking for bread. They had no taste for the truths of God. They had no particular concern about freedom from sin and guilt and the joy of knowing the Lord. The proverb says, “Joy deferred makes the heart sick.” The crowd's heart was sick with sin, but they are not looking for sin's cure; they are looking for bread.

Sadly the disciples also betray Jesus. Most notably and most horribly Judas betrays Jesus for a bit of money. But all the rest desert Him, deny Him. Their hopes were shattered when Jesus did nothing to prevent His own arrest. From their point of view neither the power of the Jewish establishment nor the power of their Roman oppressors was overthrown by Jesus. No prospect of a reestablishment of the kingdom stood before them. If Jesus was in fact the chosen One, the Son of God sent by God for the redemption of the people of God, the light of that hope was quenched in the night shadows of the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives when brother Judas arrived with Roman and temple guards and took Jesus away. They like Judas before them went away into the night. Only Peter and John of the disciples followed Jesus, and they followed at a safe distance. They were broken hearted and afraid. That, of course, is “Good Friday”.

So we step back: on Palm Sunday the promise of the long awaited King arrives, the anointed One that was sent by God to save His people. But the key of that whole day is that they were not ready to receive Him. They simply were not ready. The question passes on to us. Have we received the king, not the miracle worker, the king? Have we

received the King who died for us because we are sinners? The only people who can enter the kingdom are sinners saved by grace. Those are the only ones. So the question is, do you understand that you are a sinner and that Jesus died for your sin so you can enter the kingdom?

Please pray with me: Father in heaven, may our hearts be open, may our necks be softened, may our minds be cleared of the thousand objections that rush forward to qualify, may we in simplicity bow before You: “I am a sinner; I have no hope except that Jesus has died for my sins. I place all my hope on what Jesus has done on the cross, and it is confirmed because I know that He rose from the dead and has fully paid the price for me and all who believe. It is, Father, in His name. Amen.