

April 26, 2015
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2015 David J. Whitcomb

To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from John 12:12-19.

1. Where did the name “Palm Sunday” come from?
2. Where do the words “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt!” first appear in the Bible?
3. What is the application of these words in the future?
4. How does the record that a crowd of people wanted to see Jesus who had done “this sign” fit with John’s reason for writing this Gospel?

PALM SUNDAY **John 12:12-19**

About a month ago, on March 29, religious people around the world celebrated Palm Sunday. Of course someone will be tempted to correct me by insisting that it was not religious people who celebrated Palm Sunday but Christians. “Palm Sunday is a distinctly Christian holiday,” they say. It is always celebrated on the Sunday before Easter, with Easter also being a distinctly Christian celebration.

Palm Sunday is when people celebrate the day Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey. The crowd thronged Him, shouting “Hosanna,” and waving palm branches. That is why it is called “Palm Sunday.” However, a bit of a question arises

based on a comparison of the four descriptions of this triumphal entry from all four of the Evangelists. Matthew wrote that the people waved branches, Mark said that they were leafy branches, and Luke doesn’t mention the waving of branches at all. Only John revealed specifically that the branches were from palm trees.

The problem comes for Christians who live in regions where there are no palm trees. What do they wave when they celebrate Palm Sunday? They wave whatever they can cut down, which has led to the day being called Yew Sunday or Branch Sunday. Why does it need to be called anything? Why do people need to wave something, and why do they need to celebrate it?

We see the influence of secular Rome in this celebration that the early Church commended for the people. The palm branch was a symbol of victory. Everyone loves to celebrate victory, right? As the visible church became thoroughly organized, the various special days connected with the crucifixion and resurrection became very important. Indeed they were non-negotiable. Adherents of the organized church had to celebrate Lent, a time of self-denial for six weeks before Easter which begins on Ash Wednesday, which also must be celebrated.

A newcomer to real Christianity might wonder where the mention of all these things is in the Bible. We might especially wonder why there is no mention in either *the Acts* or any of the letters to the various churches about the early Church celebrating Lent, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday or even Easter. There is one mention of Easter in the King James Translation in Acts 12:4 where the translators decided to render the Greek word *pasca* as Easter even though the other twenty-six times they rightly translated it Passover.

Hopefully you are getting the idea that most of the special days known in the broader scope of Christianity are actually traditions established by the religious organization that is conveniently called “the church.” In reality, this burgeoning monster is neither the Church nor is it Christian, which takes me back to the statement I began with, “Religious people around world celebrate Palm Sunday.”

That was the problem John described in our text. Every single person involved in this story was religious. None of them seemed to grasp the real meaning of what they were involved in. Most of them would, within four days, be opposed to Jesus. And it would not be

altogether accurate to even refer to the eleven choice disciples as Christians at this point. Yes, they sincerely believed in Jesus. But even they needed to have their faith strengthened, sharpened, and focused on the true purpose of Christ. It was for them as Jesus often said, they were “little faiths.”

In this story, we find a picture that should be soundly applied to modern religion. Many of the people in the world who call themselves Christians and name the name of Christ are as confused as the people in the crowd who were waving palm branches. They are as confused as the disciples themselves were. And some folks are even as confused as the Pharisees were.

Just as it Is Written (vv.12-15).

We are not unaccustomed to read that a crowd showed up wherever Jesus went. In the first couple of verses of our text, we read again that a crowd welcomed Jesus (vv.12-14). These people had been anticipating Jesus’ arrival. In fact, we might say that they had been anticipating Jesus for a long time. John wrote, *The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem (v.12).*

As the special holiday, Passover, approached, people were debating whether Jesus would attend the celebration. We read previously, *Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?” (John 11:55-56).* As the day drew closer, the people’s curiosity was satiated. Now they heard that Jesus was in the area (over at Mary’s, Martha’s, and Lazarus’ house in Bethany), and that He would be attending the feast.

What did they expect; what were they looking for; what did they want? Why all the anticipation? Somehow we get the idea that they were not anticipating a provocative Bible conference. It is doubtful that they were hoping Jesus would once again reiterate the cost of following Him. In previous encounters, Jesus had called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If anyone would come

after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

These anxious people honored God in unusual circumstances even though they might not have planned to do so or even knew what they were doing. John wrote, *And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it (v.14a).* Obviously, John left out some of the story. How did Jesus get that donkey? Luke told us, *When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you shall say this: ‘The Lord has need of it.’” So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?” And they said, “The Lord has need of it.” And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it” (Luke 19:29-35).*

Let’s take a minute to consider the strange or unexpected circumstances of this story. Jesus told two disciples to go into a particular village to a particular spot and find a colt tied (v.30)—which they found (v.32). Luke pointed out that no one had ever ridden the colt. That means that if Jesus sat on it, the scene would suddenly resemble an event at the local rodeo (v.30). Jesus sat on the colt (v.35), and there is no mention of Jesus staying on the bucking colt for eight seconds and winning the gold buckle! Jesus told the disciples that when they found the colt, they should untie it and bring it to Him (v.30). That would certainly look like theft, except that Jesus had that area covered also. He told the disciples, “If anyone asks, ‘Why are you untying it?’” (v.31). Sure enough, the owners asked that very expected and precise question (v.33). And when the disciples told the owners that the Master needed the colt they said, “Fine.”

How amazing is this story? It is no wonder that unbelievers read this and relegate it to the “legends” shelf along with stories like Pecos Bill, Paul Bunyan, and Mother Goose. It’s not legend. But it is as some of those people say: Jesus was a very kind man, He was a wonderful teacher, and He was a doer of good deeds. What they have

a hard time admitting is that Jesus was also God the Son who at this point controlled all circumstances to bring about God's glory.

As Jesus rode into the city on the colt, the crowd acknowledged the King of Israel. *So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (v.13).* There was no requirement in the law to employ palm branches during Passover. Palm trees were plentiful in the area so the people would not have a hard time finding branches. The law did instruct them to use the palm branches during the Feast of Tabernacles to build booths. But the waving of palm branches had become equated with victory. About 200 years earlier when Simon the Maccabee defeated the Syrians, he was welcomed with this kind of parade. Then the waving of palm branches became a standard celebration in victory under Roman influences also.

As Jesus rode into the city, the people waved palm branches symbolizing victory and shouting. The people's shout was rooted in Scripture and tradition. The word *Hosanna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *ho'si-a-na'* which means "save now!" or "give salvation now!" The phrase, *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* comes from Psalm 118:26. It follows the cry, "*Save us, we pray O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!*" found in the previous verse Psalm 118:25. The whole of Psalm 118 was part of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118). Therefore, during the Feast of Tabernacles, the temple choir sang this each morning while the men at the festival waved palm branches. The people also sang it during the Feast of Dedication. They would sing it again during the Feast of Passover.

Therefore, what the people shouted had Messianic overtones. The people had to be thinking about the promised king in David's lineage. There had to be ideas of Messiah on their minds. And we are not surprised at that because God had said that the people would do this. God gave a promise to that end through the old prophet Zechariah. We read it in Zechariah 9:9. *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 9:9).*

It is insightful for us to read the context of the promise. In the surrounding verses, we learn how history fit with God's promise.

From the secular facts, we know that Babylon fell to Cyrus the ruler of the Medo-Persians in 539 BC. The Bible relates that when Cyrus took the throne, he promptly signed an edict allowing all Israelites who wanted to return to Jerusalem just as God had promised he would 200 years earlier (Isaiah 44:28). Nearly 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem under the civil leadership of Zerrubbabel and the spiritual leadership of Joshua the high priest. They began to rebuild the temple but were discouraged by threats and accusations and then by political upheaval in Cyrus's kingdom.

By 522 BC, Darius came to the throne and the rebuilding in Jerusalem recommenced. God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the people during these unsettling times. Zechariah promised that ultimately God would win the battle. Now look at the context. When God's King arrives, He will cleanse and restore the nation of His people Israel (chap. 1-6). He will restore the kingdom (chap. 7-8). He will send Messiah who in the process will defeat Israel's neighboring enemies (chap. 9-10). The people will reject Messiah (chap. 11, 13). But ultimately, Messiah will reign as King and conqueror over the restored nation in His Messianic kingdom (chap. 12,14).

Okay, where does God's great promise about the King entering the city fit in all of that? The opening narrative of Zechariah 9-11 paints an accurate picture of Alexander the Great overrunning the Eastern Mediterranean region (9:13). In that context, we read this wonderful promise about Israel's king entering Jerusalem. But that's where we run into a question. Messiah didn't enter Jerusalem during Alexander's time. Zechariah 9:10 reveals that when the King comes to Jerusalem, He will bring peace to the entire world.

Practically speaking, that is yet to come since we have not known worldwide peace since Adam ate the fruit. However, at the same time, how did the angels announce the birth of Christ? "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14). Jesus Christ is the promised "Prince of Peace." Isaiah promised, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).* That is Jesus the Messiah. We know that this Messiah, Christ, came to earth as King, Mighty God,

and Peace Giver—but His own people (the Jews) did not receive Him (John 1:11). He promised that when He comes the second time, there will be no way to reject Him because He comes as the Mighty Conqueror to set up His kingdom. Zechariah promised the same thing: *It is he who shall build the temple of the LORD and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both (Zechariah 6:13)*. Jesus promised it: *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (Matthew 25:31)*.

So did the people really comprehend that Jesus was their king? They were shouting, *just as it is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” (vv.14b-15)*. They and their ancestors had looked forward for hundreds of years to the Promised King who would rule on David’s throne. God made the promise to David somewhere around 1,000 B.C. The people were faced with the lack of a king for almost 600 years before Jesus was born. They wanted the king who would restore the nation of Israel. But they were not expecting the King who would buy their salvation by sacrificing His own blood on the cross. They didn’t want a king who owned them and ruled in their hearts. Yes, the people were excited about the prospect that this was the promised ruler who would win their long-sought-for independence.

No, they didn’t understand that Jesus was their Savior, mostly because they didn’t understand they needed a Savior. The religious community today is so much like those confused people who were waving branches, throwing their cloaks on the ground, and shouting about the king who came in the name of the Lord. Religious people today love to think about Jesus the liberator. They like the idea of Him guaranteeing them safe passage through the valley of death, out of hell, and into heaven. They like the confidence that comes from knowing that if life takes a turn for the worse, they can always pray in Jesus’ name and God will do some kind of miracle to get them across their Red Sea. They are quite satisfied to believe that if they go to church somewhat regularly, participate in some form of worship, and generally live according to acceptable religious standards, they will have a pretty good life.

The crowd found at most religious events today are not interested in having a Savior who bought them by His blood and, therefore, has every right to be their Lord also. No, the crowd insists on independence, manifest destiny, the free exercise of their rights, or what they perceive to be their rights. In short, they don’t want someone telling them what to do. But that is who Jesus is. The Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace is also our Creator who has every right to tell us in precise detail how to live our lives in a way that brings glory to Him. To that end, let’s consider the responses of three different people groups that day.

Three Responses (vv.16-19).

Jesus’ followers didn’t get it. *His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him (v.16)*. They, too, misunderstood Messiah’s purpose. Without exception, the twelve disciples saw Jesus as the promised king who would free Israel from Rome. One of the disciples was named Simon the Zealot. This does not mean that he was a zealous soul winner, though that is exactly what he became. But at this point he was associated with the *Zeiloteis*, a political group who had aspirations toward Israel’s independence. It is almost certain that Judas Iscariot was driven by political aspirations. We know that James and John were because they pressured their mommy into requesting the chief positions in Jesus’ cabinet when He established the Kingdom.

Because the disciples were transfixed on political positions, they could not grasp Jesus’ teaching about His coming torture, crucifixion, and death. How could the conquering King be crucified? As a result, even Jesus’ resurrection seemed to baffle them.

They figured it out when Jesus was glorified. When was Jesus glorified? Peter, James, and John saw a brief display of His glory on the Mountain (Matthew 17:1-13). In that event, the three disciples were impressed that Jesus was divine, that is, that He came from God. But their idea of building booths as a memorial revealed their misunderstanding of Jesus winning redemption.

Again, Jesus was certainly glorified on the cross. He referred to it as His coming glory (John 12:23). It was a glorifying event because the amazing plan of redemption for the fallen creation rose or fell on God the Son shedding His innocent blood vicariously. This glorifying of the Son reflects God's own glory. Jesus had said, *When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him at once" (John 13:31-32).*

Jesus was also glorified in the resurrection. Resurrection was part of the glory attached with the crucifixion. He set the standard for the glorified body all of us will one day have (1 Cor. 15:43). Likewise, Jesus was glorified in the ascension and His ministry of interceding (Heb. 1:3; 2:9). And Jesus was glorified in the giving of the Holy Spirit. He promised to send the Comforter who is like Him (John 16:7). The Comforter testifies about Him (John 15:26). Therefore, the disciples finally understood who Jesus was and what Messiah's purpose was because the Comforter brought Jesus' lessons to their minds. That is what Jesus promised would happen. *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).*

Religious people will always talk about Jesus, but they will never know Jesus. Only those who are regenerated through the work of the Holy Spirit will be able to grasp who Jesus is. Only through the miracle of salvation by grace and through faith will we understand that Jesus came to earth to become the Redeemer of the fallen creation through the sacrifice of His blood.

The crowd continued to bear witness they didn't intend (vv.17-18). They kept shouting about Jesus being the king. *The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness (v.17).* Some of the people in the crowd had also witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. They were convinced that this man had to be the promised King. As some people shouted "God save now," these witnesses affirmed that Jesus saved Lazarus from the great enemy called death. How could He raise the dead and not be the one who comes in the name of the Lord?

They were impressed with demonstrations of power. *The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign (v.18).* John wrote that this is why Jesus did miracles—sort of. John concluded, *But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).* All kinds of people will always be attracted to spectacular, unusual things. But Satan, the father of all lies, knows this better than anyone. He will deceive when possible even through mighty works.

The question is not, "Are you attracted to Jesus because He does unusual things?" The question is, "Do you believe that Jesus is God in the flesh (proved by His miracles) who paid the penalty for your sins with His own blood?" The people didn't really believe that Jesus was their Savior.

The Pharisees feared. *So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him" (v.19).* They blamed each other for the problem. The Sadducees (chief priests) had already decided to kill Jesus; they were just trying to figure out how and when. The Pharisees were less concerned about Jesus' political agenda than Him exposing them as frauds. The more people who believed Jesus, the fewer there would be who listened to them. Like children, they blamed each other for the problem.

The problem was that Jesus was superceding them. Or so it appeared to them. Jesus knew better. On one hand, the whole world was going after Jesus because in the next section of John's writing we discover that the Gentiles showed up wanting to see Jesus. On the other hand, if the whole world had really gone after Jesus, why was there almost no one to stand with Him at His trial and crucifixion?

Most of the time when it looks like the whole world is following Jesus, it is only that they are following their perception of Jesus. When the world learns that sincere following of Jesus requires them to die to their own feelings in order to be associated with the shame of the cross, they stop following quite quickly. A couple of days after this apparent popular uprising, Jesus will explain to His followers that they will never be popular with the world, just like He was really never popular with them (John 15).

An unconverted world warmly embraces religious holidays and traditions. But Jesus is not about man-made traditions. He is about the truth that the creation is fallen into sin and He came to redeem us through His sacrifice. Do you believe it? Live it!