

Order of Worship for March 28, 2010, Palm Sunday

Pre-service Song

Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: Steve and Carol Lyons, EFCA missionaries to Tanzania

Call to Worship: Zechariah 9:9, Luke 19:28-42 and Prayer

Special Music: Evangelical Free Church Sunday School Children

Songs of Worship:

“In the Name of the Lord”

Song # 299

“We Will Glorify”

Song # 301

“Prince of Peace”

Overhead

“All Glory, Laud and Honor”

Song # 300

Offering:

“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

Song # 43

Message:

“Thrones and Rocks” (Luke 19:28-40)

By Pastor Bronson

Closing Song:

“All Hail King Jesus”

Song # 103

Parting Word of Grace

Discipleship Hour

All are urged to meet in the Sanctuary at 11:00 am following the fellowship time to hear of the Lord’s work as experienced by Steve and Carol Lyons.

All Church Pot Luck

With

Steve and Carol Lyons

Hosted by the

EFCA Missions Team

(Vespers is cancelled)

“The Prayer Closet”

March 28, 2010

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Steve and Carol Lyons:** that their home furlough in 2010 will be a time of personal refreshment, encouragement and spiritual renewal; that they will be warmly welcomed by their supporters and add to the list; that the work they left in Africa will prosper under the Spirit’s care; that they will have all their needs met
2. **President Barak Obama:** that he will be protected from ill and foolish advice; that he will understand, respect and support the tradition and traditional values of the nation; that he and his family will be safe and healthy
3. **Music Ministry:** that each group preparing for spring performances will remain focused and committed; that the directors and accompanists will work gracefully together; that all participants will sense the potential for effective witness through the music
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: Sgt. Jonathan Sweetman** (son of Catherine Sweetman):
5. **College student of the week: Caleb Bronson and the University of Michigan** (son of John and Nini Bronson): that Caleb will maintain a strong focus in his faith and witness to fellow students; that he will be disciplined with his time for studies, practice and activities; that he can secure summer employment and adequate funding for continued studies

Palm Sunday Message as preached March 28, 2010

I have changed the title [of today's message] from "Thrones to Rocks" to "A Donkey Ride" in order that we would focus our minds on what actually occurred in the city of Jerusalem coming from Bethany into the city. The passage is Luke 19:23-40. This is the account as Luke gives it of the Triumphal Entry of Jesus' into Jerusalem.

"And when He had said these things [referring to Jesus who had just told the parable of the Ten Minas, a king going away and coming back again], He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 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. And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. As He was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of His disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!' And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, 'Teacher, rebuke you disciples.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.' And when He drew near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, 'Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

Palm Sunday is, perhaps, the most ambiguous of the Christian holidays. When we celebrate Christmas, we know what we are doing, or at least we think we know what we are doing: it is the birth of Christ! A little later on there is a holiday we don't observe much anymore. It is called "Epiphany". It is actually the celebration of Twelfth Night and is celebrated on the sixth of January. It celebrates when the magi came and recognized that Jesus is divine. Then we come to what we call Easter but is really the celebration of [Passover]. These are very clear and full of meaning for us. But what does it mean to celebrate Palm Sunday? What exactly is it we are doing, what is the focus.

The event itself of Palm Sunday began well enough. Jesus is approaching Jerusalem from the town of Bethany. He is ascending, as we are told, the Mount of Olives from the other side. There He mounts this foal, the colt of a donkey, which He had sent His disciples into the city to get. Then He rides down the mountain and eventually He gets through the city and arrives at the Temple. As He proceeds, the crowd rapidly grows and so does the intensity of the crowd's joy. At the same time, however, if we are watching closely, we realize that not everybody is participating in the joy.

Obviously just in reading the text it is clear that the Pharisees are not participating in the joy. They object. They find this wild celebration out of order. If we follow Jesus we arrive with Jesus at the Temple, we see that Jesus also finds something out of order. He finds what is going on at the Temple with the selling of the sacrificial animals and the money changers is out of order. He turns over the tables and kicks them out. By the time we come to the close of this donkey ride, we realize that two different orders are coming into clash with each other. All is not underneath the surface as it appears on the surface. The crowd probably didn't even notice for the most part. They remain no doubt for the entirety of that day in a happy and expectant mood. People love to dance and dream of wonderful things. But by the week's end, as we know, the songs had died and the shouts had changed their character.

The crowd welcoming Jesus into the ancient city of Jerusalem was not the usual mix of city residents, traders, folk from the surrounding villages and travelers, whether we have in mind foreign dignitaries, representative of the Roman occupying power or just the curious who tend to wander the earth at all times.

All those were present, of course, but in addition there were also the followers of Jesus, and there were those who came to celebrate Passover. They came from all over the Roman Empire and even outside of the Roman Empire. They came to celebrate the memorial of the great act of liberation by which the people who had been enslaved by the Egyptians are set free and they become the elect of God. Then, of course, Jesus' own followers, gathered around Him, full of memory of what He has done, full of anticipation of what lies before them. It was indeed an exciting time to be with this prophet who stirred up the hopes that at long last God was preparing to fulfill all the promises for the restoration of the glory of Israel.

They had good reason for their expectations. What we need to do is to take a moment and think to ourselves very clearly what exactly is it that Jesus does on this day, on this donkey ride? What does He do? Then we are going to ask ourselves the question, why does He do it? We need to consider all of these things in the context of this ride into the city. Realize that just before this day, Jesus has come to the little town of Bethany and He has raised a man from the dead. This is not a chance occurrence. He had been notified by Martha and Mary, who were well known in the city of Jerusalem—we know that because we are told that after Lazarus died people come from the city of Jerusalem back and forth in order to comfort these two sisters, and they are well known as followers of Jesus. They had notified Jesus ahead of time, before Lazarus had died, asking Him to come and heal their brother, and Jesus had deliberately not come in order that Lazarus would die in order that He could come and raise Lazarus from the dead immediately before he entered the city. The people in the city knew that Martha and Mary and Lazarus were followers of Jesus. They knew he had been buried. Many of the friends had gone out from the city to comfort the sisters in their loss and they were there in fact when Jesus arrived. So you need to understand that the raising of Lazarus from the dead after four days in the tomb was not something done in an obscure corner that needed to be sort of broadcast just in order to capture peoples' attention; they knew what had happened and the reports could be neither doubted nor ignored. That is pretty exciting indeed, knowing that somebody has been raised from the dead and that the person who just did it is arriving in town.

The great hope of the Jews was for the restoration and the independence of Israel from all foreign rule, the restoration of the purity of the land, clearing and cleaning out every presence and evidence of idolatry. As might be expected, the first dream was somewhat more lively in people's expectations than the second: national sovereignty, power and prosperity are generally easier to imagine – and to want – than piety and purity. Every year the situation was a tricky one for the Jewish leadership and for the Roman overlords. The crowd that came at Passover was volatile. It would surge. It was looking for the time when the Messiah would come. That was very much on their minds year after year. They anticipated something great would happen. Many had sacrificed a great deal in order to come to the homeland to celebrate the great feast. Religious sensitivities were heightened; so were nationalist sensibilities. Within the densely packed city, overflowing with pilgrims, were many pockets of seething discontent and ambition. For the authorities keeping order was major challenge.

So, what did Jesus do? When you examine His arrival you realize very quickly this was a staged event. Jesus picked out the parts and pieces most deliberately. He is making a statement, and the statement is exactly the one which the people read. Jesus mounts that donkey and enters the city, "I am the Messiah!" We read a part of that as the call to worship. Let me read the full passage from Zechariah 9:9-17:

"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." The promise goes on from there: "...I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse 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 [meaning the river Euphrates] to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double." Now just stop for a moment. Imagine the Jews are there in that city and you have got Roman centurions here and there. You are paying taxes to the imperial power far away. Every day you are outraged by the presence of idolatry in your city. Then

you hear these words ringing through your heart as a man arrives in the city having just raised someone from the dead and he is riding on a donkey and he is obviously saying, “Now!” What would that do to you? *“For I have bent Judah as my bow; I have made Ephraim its arrow. I will stir up your sons, O Zion. . .”* – “That’s us!” the shout would course through their listening and longing hearts – *“...against you, O Greece. . .”* –Greece was the cultural fount of all the rot and corruption by which the orthodox had been seduced – *“...and wield you like a warrior’s sword. Then the will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning; the Lord God will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour, and tread down the sling stones, and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine, and be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar* – remember what he is talking about is blood from the sacrificial animals – *“On that day the Lord the God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women.”*

That has got to have been most exciting to those Jews! So what were they thinking?

What did Jesus do? Jesus made sure that He arrives at the city at Passover, knowing there shall be the largest gathering at any time of the history of Israel year by year at that very hour. The people will be filled with expectations, intense with the memory of their independence and the glorious liberating power of God. We need to think about this. Why would Jesus do this? Why would Jesus stir up the people, deliberately awakening their expectations, and at the same time, why would He alarm the authorities? We cannot doubt that Jesus knew the Jews were excitable in the matter. Men claiming to be the messiah were a recurrent feature of Jewish life and almost always called out a following. But, Jesus riding that donkey down that hill, the Mount of Olives, into the city of Jerusalem and winding his way up and coming up to the Temple was as much as saying to the Roman authorities, “Hey, hey, do you see me? Look! Do you notice? Here I’m coming. Here I am; keep your eye on me.” And of course they did. You have to think about this. This is a very strange way to enter the city. This is not discrete. It is as bold and open and up-front as it could be.

When Jesus was born and the magi came from the east, the religious leaders were ready instantly to answer Herod’s question as to where the promised Messiah, the king of the Jews, was to be born. Interest, of course, in the prophecies was not limited to the common people, but the interest did not express itself in the same way by all. We are told here in this passage, in Luke 19, that when the Pharisees who stood – and by now when you come in these Gospels you reach the account of this last week, we realize that the Pharisees sum up within themselves as being islands of self-righteousness and self-regard, and the look out at the crowd and they are full of condemnation, and they say to Jesus, “Rebuke your disciples.” I am quite sure they knew exactly what they were looking at. They knew that Jesus was presenting himself as the Messiah, and it was deeply troubling to them. From their point of view it was just one more provocation by a now almost impossibly difficult up-start, a self-proclaimed rabbi, a rule breaker who know has the gall to present himself as the Messiah. Of course at the same time it would stir up the wild enthusiasm of the crowd. Why would Jesus do all this?

It is wise for us to appreciate the fact that the response by the Roman authorities, the response by the religious leaders, the response by the crowd had not been forced. They have acted freely; they have done exactly what they felt like doing. But what do we think was Jesus intention, what was on His mind? Notice that in Luke’s account he places the Pharisee’s complaint and Jesus’ immediate reply right before he speaks of Jesus’ weeping as he rides the donkey down the Mount of Olives and he sees glimpses of Jerusalem through the olive trees. Read with me Luke 19:41-44. He is on the donkey and he is riding down the hill and all around him people are waving these branches and they are shouting out at the top of their voice, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Blessed be the king!” That is what is going on around him and this is what Jesus was doing as he rode the donkey down the hill. *“And when*

he drew near and saw the city, he wept. . .” He wept. Did anybody notice? And he said, *“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now – did you get that? Now: this hour, 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. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”* Before Jesus entered the city, He knew it was over. Forty years later, a Roman general by the name of Trajan led the Roman armies as they surrounded the city of Jerusalem and they reduced it to rubble and they killed everybody inside.

Luke ends his account of the Triumphal entry with the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus. *“It is written,”* He said, *‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.*” How do you think the high priesthood would respond to Jesus’ words? For them to accept Jesus as the Messiah required that they admitted they had turned the house of God into a den of robbers. His words, you see, were a direct provocation, a ‘poke in the eye’ as it were.

The last of the ‘actors’ is the crowd. Sometimes people will talk as if Jesus was appealing to the crowd. Certainly he was playing on their sensibilities. But it is very significant if you look to the beginning of John’s Gospel, John 2:23-25. There we learn Jesus’ opinion, His assessment, His understanding of the average man: that is what “the crowd” means. This is the comment that is made regarding Jesus’ perception of the average man: *“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast,”* this was an earlier one, *“. . .many believed in his name when they saw the signs that He was doing. But Jesus on His part did not entrust himself to them. . . (why did He not?), because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”* The modern era, of which we are a part, in contrast to all those before, prides itself in having a positive and optimistic view of humanity. The basic assumption is that all people are good until adverse circumstances or oppressive regimes or unhealthy relationships and other bad things work their influence on people. That is what makes us less than perfect. Under the right circumstances and opportunities, we say, the basic underlying goodness of people can be brought forward and be given dominance in their lives. A new day will begin. If you examine advertising, that is the continual message. It is also the message in political rhetoric, education, the endless literature and culture of self-help: we can improve ourselves to goodness! Neither Jesus nor the Scriptures agree with us. In fact, as I was looking at this, I thought it was very interesting and as a sort of shock to me, there is one thing in which Christians and radical environmentalists agree, and that is that you and I are the most dangerous creatures on this planet.

Jesus knew from the outset that people, the common man of the village and town, as much as the people of power and privilege were not to be trusted. Jesus knew that without adequate leadership, without strong men willing to stand against the hostility of the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Romans, the average man of the street, square and alleyway would hide, run away, or worse of all, would shift their ground in order to side with whoever looked to be the winner. On the day of the donkey ride Jesus looked to be the winner, and the crowd was with him. But by the end of the week he was the loser, and the crowd was gone.

Where do these observations take us? Well, they at least ask us and invite us and to wonder what was God doing with His Son Jesus by having Him ride that donkey into the city and stirring up a lot more than happy shouts and children’s songs in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah to set all things right for the Jews. The Spirit of God has given us an excellent commentary on this day and the week following. You will find in Acts 4:23-33. This is what was written by Luke:

“And when [the apostles Peter and John] were released [from jail for preaching in the name of Jesus], they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and elders had said to them. And when [the disciples] heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered

together, against his Anointed” —for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

What do we think? God gives us choices, but He never leaves anything to chance. Most people know there is a mystery here. Attempting to solve the mystery is risky, for it takes us beyond the range of human understanding and into the operations or ways of God. As Jesus said to the Pharisees, if necessary, go would have the rocks give Him praise. He leaves nothing to chance. The high priests, the Jewish and Roman rulers and the people of Israel all had a choice to make regarding Jesus. His words and His actions made it perfectly clear who he was, and why he had arrived. That is why on more than one occasion the Jews sought to stone Him to death for blasphemy. God offered them a choice. They could accept Jesus as He had presented Himself and proved Himself to be, the Messiah. They could have done that. Nothing constrained them to refuse, to remain stubbornly blind, refusing to connect the dots. They could have done it, but Jesus already knew they would not. He knew that they were too deeply invested in the way things are. He also knew that for the most part they were strangers to humility, being self-righteous, and He knew of them that they were blind to their need for repentance, for they considered themselves to be masters of keeping the rules. The choice that they made was the choice that is spelled out in Psalm 2; they raged and they plotted. The plot succeeded. The crowd was duped and manipulated into a great frenzy of hatred for the man that six days previous they hailed as the promised Messiah. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. From there He shall come to judge the living and the dead. The choice made by the rulers and the peoples fulfilled the plan of God. God leaves nothing to chance. They, of course, intended for their choice to bring an end to Jesus, to silence His voice and lead to the final dispersal of His followers. It did not happen. Forty days later the very men who ran away and hid on the night of Jesus' betrayal stepped forward with irrepressible boldness, preaching salvation in the name of Jesus. In the power of the Holy Spirit the church of Jesus Christ was born. We are part of that church. That is why we are here today.

Not only did the leaders and the people make choices, so did the disciples. It is worth reflecting on the pattern of their choices. They chose to run away. On the night when Jesus was betrayed, the soldiers came led by Judas into the Garden, to a man they ran. But that is not the end of the story. They also chose to remain together. They were woven together by their memories, by their experiences and their hopes. Though their hopes and their dreams were shattered and they were broken men, they stayed together in the same company. Then, when Jesus met them in the Upper Room, He gave them a choice again, and they chose to believe. And after that choice, He gave them a choice again: he said you stay in the city and wait until the power of the Holy Spirit comes, and they did, they chose to obey. When the Spirit was poured out on them on day of Pentecost they received the Spirit of power and they preached the gospel of salvation through the name of Jesus, the Anointed One of God.

They went out into the city and they offered a choice to the Jews. They said, you have the choice to believe. On that day 3000 of the Jews said, we accept the choice, we will believe. We will believe that the man which about one and a half months ago we shouted out and condemned to death, we will believe that He in fact is the Messiah and the Savior of the world. That is the One who will be my Lord and my King.

God offers us a choice, but He does not leave things to chance. He offered choices to the governmental authorities, to the religious leaders, to the followers of Jesus, to the crowd as He rode the colt, the foal of a donkey into Jerusalem, carefully fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah and speaking with forceful clarity to all who waited for the promised Messiah. Each one chose, and the

sum of their choices fulfilled the plan of God. God is offering the choice today. It is the same choice: will you choose to believe that the man who rode the donkey is in fact the Savior of the world? Will you choose both to believe and obey? Understand that whether you say yes or no, your choice and those of all humanity will fulfill the plan of God, and it will be to His glory. If men are silent, the rocks will sing. Personally, I intend to sing with the rocks. Will you?

What we celebrate on Palm Sunday is the King of all creation having come and offering to us the choice to bend the knee and to say, "You are my Lord, and you are my King. All of my hope I put in you." My prayer is that each person in this room will make that choice. My certainty is that whatever you choose, God will be glorified, for He rules.

Let us pray: Our Father in heaven, we give You thanks. We reflect upon the profound choice and the grace which lies behind it. May we by Your grace not neglect this great choice, but Father instead with all who love Thee in Christ bend the knee and say "He indeed is the Lord of lords and the King of kings." Amen.