

Turn Your Eyes
A Prophetic Entrance
Luke 19:28-44
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Tony Campolo, a well-known preacher and former professor at Eastern University in Philadelphia, told a story about being asked to preach in a Black church. Black churches are known for their enthusiasm and passion, and Campolo was excited to preach there. Rising to the occasion, he spoke with unusual fervor and energy, and when he was done, an older Black preacher who was preaching after him patted him on the knee as if to say, “That was pretty good young man, but this is what a real sermon sounds like.” The older, Black preacher slowly approached the podium and began in a slow cadence that continued to build in energy and volume. “It’s Friday. Jesus is praying. Peter’s a sleeping. Judas is betraying. But Sunday’s comin’.”

I won’t repeat the whole sermon, because as a white guy with limited rhythm, I can’t do this sermon justice, but here are some lines from it.

It’s Friday. The Romans beat my Jesus. They robe him in scarlet. They crown him with thorns. But they don’t know that Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. See Jesus walking to Calvary. His blood dripping. His body stumbling. And his spirit’s burdened. But you see, it’s only Friday, but Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. The soldiers nail my Savior’s hands to the cross. They nail my Savior’s feet to the cross. And then they raise him up next to criminals. It’s Friday, but Sunday’s comin’.

It’s Friday. Jesus is buried. A soldier stands guard. And a rock is rolled into place. But it’s Friday. It is only Friday. Sunday is a comin’! – Preached by S.M. Lockridge

The refrain of that sermon, “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s comin’,” perfectly captures the importance of Lent. Our celebration of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter is glorious because of all Jesus went through to reach that point. Just as the sunrise is so brilliant because of the

darkness of the night, Lent is a season of preparation that helps us fully appreciate what Jesus has done for us. “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s a comin’!”

Easter Sunday is the highpoint of the church year—the day we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Three days after He was unceremoniously crucified on a Roman cross, God raised Jesus to life. Jesus’ resurrection demonstrated God’s power over death and sin and assured us that life doesn’t end when our time here on earth expires.

In today’s sermon, we’re going to look at Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem at the start of Holy Week, just five days before He was crucified. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 19:28—an event we know as Palm Sunday.

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

They replied, “The Lord needs it.”

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

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

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

“I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden

from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Most of us have a general understanding of what took place on Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem and was celebrated as royalty. We remember the waving of the palm branches and the children praising God, but it's easy to miss the significance of what Jesus did that day and how the crowd responded if we don't consider the history behind Jesus' actions.

Every spring, thousands of Jewish pilgrims journeyed to the holy city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival. Passover was the celebration of God's deliverance of his people from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. On the night the Israelites were finally released from Egypt, God brought the most horrific of his 10 plagues on the Egyptians: the death of all their firstborn sons and livestock.

God instructed his people, the Israelites, to kill a lamb as a sacrifice and to place a stripe of blood above their doorposts so that as the angel of death traveled through Egypt, he would know which homes to pass over. On that night, Egyptians all over Egypt lost their firstborn sons and livestock, but the Israelites who placed the blood of a lamb over their doorpost were spared. After this terrible plague, Pharaoh finally released the Israelites from bondage. From that day forward, God instructed his people to celebrate the Passover as a reminder of their deliverance from slavery. It was during the annual Passover celebration that Jesus entered Jerusalem to a raucous crowd's welcome just days before his arrest.

In Jesus' day, Passover was celebrated in remembrance of what God had done for his people, but it also served as a painful reminder to the Israelites that they were no longer a free people. They were still in bondage. Egyptian captivity had been replaced by Roman oppression, and just as their ancestors longed for freedom in Egypt centuries earlier, the Israelites now hungered to be free from of Roman oppression.

During Passover, the Jewish people looked with anticipation for their deliverer, and not surprisingly, through the years, many leaders came proclaiming deliverance and declaring

themselves to be the promised Messiah. In addition to thousands of pilgrims who had flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Jerusalem was also filled with legions of Roman soldiers under the command of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. These soldiers were on high alert, guarding against the threat of armed rebellions and prepared to quickly stamp out any uprisings by revolutionary leaders and their followers who dared to challenge Rome's authority.

Into this tinderbox came Jesus, the popular rabbi, who had gained a sizeable following by preaching and teaching with authority and performing miracles that included raising Jairus' daughter and Lazarus from the dead. I'd like to read Jason Porterfield's account of what took place next from his book, "Fight Like Jesus."

As Jesus neared Jerusalem, the people who lined his path began chanting, "Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna!" Nowadays we use the word hosanna primarily as an expression of praise to God. It has become an interjection of adoration, similar to hallelujah.

But on that day outside Jerusalem, the word meant something far different. Hosanna is the Aramaic form of a two-part Hebrew word—the verb *hosiah* coupled with the emphatic particle *na*. *Hosiah* means, "help us, deliver us, liberate us, save us." The ending *na* conveys a sense of urgency. When fused together with, *hosiahna* meant "Oh, save us now!" or "Deliver us, we plead!" It was a cry for help. – Jason Porterfield, "Fight Like Jesus"

The crowds' exuberant praise of Jesus rested on the hope that He had come to rescue them. Covering the road with their cloaks and waving palm branches were actions associated with the coronation of a new king. The people were anticipating crowning Jesus their king.

Aware of the history, Jesus' symbolic entry into Jerusalem on a donkey communicated that He was a special kind of king. Jesus was following a historic practice. In the Old Testament, in 1 Kings 1, David arranged for his son Solomon to enter Jerusalem on a mule no one had ever ridden as part of his coronation ceremony when he was introduced as king.

Jesus' choice of a donkey as his transportation, rather than a stallion, also communicated this king came in peace, not violence and war. Bible scholar J.F. Coakley writes,

“By not riding a horse, as a nationalistic messiah would be expected to do, Jesus intended to rebuke or correct the aspirations of those who acclaimed him. He was acting out the role of a humble, peaceable king.” The crowd should have understood that Jesus’ use of a donkey symbolized peace rather than war, but in their fervor and hunger for deliverance, they continued to hope Jesus would lead a rebellion to overthrow Rome. In his gospel, Jesus’ disciple John quotes the prophet Zechariah, tying Jesus’ mission to a peaceful arrival rather than a war-like entrance.

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses 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)

Aside from his unusual choice of a young donkey for transportation, Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday contained other symbolism that wasn’t quite as obvious. Sunday of Passover week was historically the first day of Passover. This was the day when, according to Exodus 12, every Jewish family would select a lamb for their household to eat the Passover meal. Each family was instructed to bring their lamb through the entrance to the city known as “The Sheep Gate.” As Jesus traveled down the Mount of Olives and into the city, it’s likely his route would have taken Him through the entrance known as “The Sheep Gate.” To those who were paying attention, Jesus was offering Himself to Israel as the sacrificial or Passover lamb, sent by God to take away the sin of the world.

From time to time when we study the gospels, I’ve spoken of Jesus’ “upside down kingdom.” The phrase “upside down,” speaks to how radically different Jesus’ kingdom and his values are when compared with the priorities of our world. The contrast between Jesus’ kingdom and the world in which we live can be clearly seen in the difference between a renowned Jewish hero and Jesus.

In 167 B.C., over a century before Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jerusalem was under the rule of a Greek dynasty. Their king, Antiochus, overran Jerusalem and then systematically desecrated the temple by slaughtering a pig on the altar and sprinkling its blood throughout the temple area. All Jews were ordered to make sacrifices to the Greek gods, and soldiers were sent to each town to enforce this decree. In one town, after a Jew agreed to make this sacrifice to spare his life, an old priest named Mattathias stabbed the man to death and then killed the soldier sent to enforce the sacrifices. Mattathias then tore down the pagan altar and ran to the hills to hide. Near the end of his life, the ailing man called his five sons to him and charged them to gain revenge against the Greeks. Mattathias' third son, Judas, took up the challenge and became known as "Judas the Hammer." Judas led a revolt that recaptured some of the towns around Jerusalem and reclaimed the temple. As Judas entered Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, his followers welcomed him by waving palm branches. From that time forward, the palm branch became a symbol of independence for Jewish people—not unlike American flags are viewed in our day. Judas the Hammer's bravery was so revered that in Jesus' day the image of palm branches was imprinted on some Jewish coins.

Two hundred years after Judas' crusade, Jesus the Messiah, entered Jerusalem on a donkey, and He was greeted with the waving of palm branches as He rode along a path strewn with clothes and palms. But Jesus entered Jerusalem not as "The Hammer" but as "The Lamb." To a world that valued violence, force, and power Jesus came as a humble "suffering servant."

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey as the sacrificial lamb of God reminds us where our true deliverance and salvation lie. As Americans, we've been blessed with many freedoms and a belief in God that has been built into the fabric of our culture. While we experience many benefits from our cultural heritage, it also comes with a shadow side. As Christians living in the United States of America, it's easy for us to confuse our political structures and system with God's kingdom and to assume that worldly power, influence, and dominance are the same as God's power and his kingdom. Jesus' life and teaching, his upside kingdom, show us a different way.

One of my practices during Lent for the past number of years has been rereading Philip Yancey's book, "The Jesus I Never Knew." In the section of the book I read this morning, Yancey

points out how antithetical Jesus' kingdom is to our ideas of worldly power and influence. The beatitudes, which Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with clearly highlight the difference between Jesus' kingdom and the kingdom of this world.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus poignantly demonstrated the contrast between his kingdom and the kingdom of this world on Palm Sunday when He entered Jerusalem during Passover, riding a donkey and presenting Himself as a sacrifice for all: the perfect Lamb of God.

As we walk through this Lenten season, my hope is that each of us will be reminded of our brokenness and sin. I pray that every misconception we have that we can somehow save ourselves will be revealed for the lie that it is, and that in repentance, we'll turn to Jesus and cry, "Lord, save us, heal us, redeem us!"

Last Sunday, we began our Lenten worship services with the imposition of ashes, a symbol of our human frailty and sinfulness. The words our staff spoke over each person who received the ashes was, "Repent and believe the Good News." Our circumstances are different than the Jewish people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but like them, we too need a Savior, a deliverer. Our hearts cry out, "Lord, save us, deliver us, heal us!" As we sing this song together and respond, I encourage each of us to turn our eyes toward Jesus our Messiah.