

Journey to the Cross... Making Room in the Father's House

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - April 5, 2020 - Palm Sunday

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Lord God, Almighty and Everlasting Father, it is You who has brought us in safety to this new day. Preserve us with Your mighty power. Help us to not be overcome by adversity. By Your strength and direction fulfill Your purpose in and through us. We pray for all those who are hurting this day, those who are sick, and those who seek You to bring about healing of their body, mind and spirit. We ask You to heal, strengthen, protect, and comfort them. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

For this sermon, I'll be drawing from some of the writing of Rev. Tim Keller in his book *King's Cross*. I'll read now from **Matthew 21:1-15** and then I'll read from **Mark 11:11-15** a little later during my sermon. You may want to hit pause now to get your Bibles open to Mark chapter 11. That may be the surprising part of this story. Would you pray with me again?

Prayer of Confession and Pardon

Dear Lord, We ask You to give us Your Wisdom. Speak to us through Your Word and Your Spirit, so we will know Your love and guidance. Lord, we confess that we do not always obey what You want us to do. We humbly ask for Your promised forgiveness. Lead us in the paths of righteousness for Your Name sake. Thank You that You are faithful and just to forgive us from all unrighteousness. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Matthew 21:1-15

21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

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

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

⁹ 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 heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Jesus at the Temple

¹² Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³ “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus seems to do the opposite of what we’d expect Him to do? Everything is always upsidedown. He says, “The first will be last and the last will be first.” “The meek will inherit the earth.” We see Jesus do the opposite again when He enters Jerusalem.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem He rode in on a young donkey. The kind a child would ride on. It seems strange even to us today. If you’re not going to ride on a stately horse, why not just walk in? But what did the people do? They greeted Him like a King. They laid down their cloaks and palm branches. They shouted “Save [Us] Now”, “Hosanna”, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” This might

have even been a quote from Psalm 118:25, **“Save now, I beseech Thee, O Lord.”**

They truly were expecting Jesus to be a king like King David who had made Israel a powerful nation. They were expecting Jesus to overthrow their Roman occupiers and free them politically from Rome. The Gospel of Mark quotes the crowd as saying, **“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”**

You know the Hebrew people were a defeated people. Defeated by Rome, defeated by sin and sickness. Their spiritual life left them feeling empty and wondering if God was ever going to show up again in a powerful way. I can understand why they would yell for Jesus, they were ready for something BIG!

The Roman officials knew the crowds were calling Jesus the King of the Jews, so they probably would have stopped Jesus outside the city gates, if He'd gathered His followers behind on war chariots.

If we had been there, this would probably have seemed odd to us. If He's important, why not look it? Why ride in on a baby donkey? Anyone who wanted Him to overthrow Roman rule was probably disappointed. It probably seemed odd to the Romans in Jerusalem. If Jesus is drawing crowds, why not at least look important? But then some that day were probably thinking of Zechariah 9:9, a prophecy that the Messiah would come this way.

**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.**

In fact, while Jesus entering on a donkey may have been the opposite we would have expected, Jesus riding in on a young donkey gave just the right message to those who were paying attention that day. Jesus entered Jerusalem that day to help a defeated people, by conquering sin and death. He had all the strength of Lion that day, but entered like a Lamb. Amazing, but it wouldn't be until after Easter that this would all begin to be understood.

From our vantage point, Jesus' resurrection was about to conquer sin and death. Tim Keller suggests Jesus was entering as both a Lamb and a Lion: a sacrifice that conquers. A vision of this was given to John in the book of Revelation 5:6, **"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne."** When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowd knew enough to shout Hosanna, "Save Now," because He was entering the way the Messiah was supposed to.

Jesus was going to conquer with the strength of a lion, now let's consider the Lamb. This was just before Passover, after all. Passover was a time when Hebrew people remembered God sparing the lives of anyone who sacrificed a lamb and put its blood over the entry to their home. All were spared, because of the blood of the lamb.

Jesus was the Lamb about to be sacrificed to defeat sin and death once and for all. (Hebrews 10:10 says this.) But where is the set up for that? If riding on a donkey showed He was the Messiah, was anything saying He's the sacrificial Lamb?

For that I'd like us to look at Mark's account in Mark 11:11-15. It says Jesus goes to the temple courts, then because it's the end of the day, He takes a short walk to Bethany and comes back the next day. Mark includes this piece of the story, probably because it sets up what Jesus is about to do. Why go to the temple and then go home? Because it sets up why we need Jesus, the Lamb.

Let me read from Mark 11:11-15.

11 Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there.

Why does Mark include this story of a fig tree? Why not just get straight to the action of Jesus clearing the Temple? Surely, He could have thrown over a few tables at the end

of the day. There is a reason why we find a story about a fig tree.

Rev. Tim Keller talks a bit about fig trees in his book *King's Cross*. He says, fig trees produce edible food twice a year. Once as figs and once as little edible buds that travelers would often eat. That means when Jesus approached it outside of fig season, it would have had these little edible buds on them, but this tree didn't have any. That meant it was not going to produce fruit in season. The tree had become worthless for nourishing people.

Now when we read this, right before Jesus clears the temple courts, we have to ask if there's anything for us to learn from this? Why are they together? It's because the temple had gone spiritually bankrupt. It was no longer nourishing the people of God. I wonder if that's why it is in Chapter 11 of Mark.

Now let's consider where Jesus was in the temple. Tim Keller points out that, when Jesus stepped inside the temple door, the first area was the court of the Gentiles. That's the only place non-Jews were allowed. They couldn't go farther inside. If God was going to be opening up His blessing for all nations as He promised Abraham in Genesis 12, then this is where it would begin for non-Jewish people.

Note this was the largest part of the temple, so what was going on here? Jesus walks in late in the day and sees lots of people buying and selling animals and a bunch of money changing tables. He would have seen thousands of people, because people were coming to Jerusalem for Passover from all over the ancient world.

Tim Keller writes, “The ancient historian Josephus tells us that in Passover week one year, 255,000 lambs were bought, sold, and sacrificed in the temple courts.” “Think of how tumultuous, loud, and confusing our financial trading floors are [on Wall Street] and then add livestock.” “And this was the place where the Gentiles were supposed to find God through quiet reflection and prayer.” Pg. 156. What does Jesus say at this point? He quotes Isaiah 56:7, **“My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”** And Jesus’ action is swift: He starts throwing over the furniture. *Now we see the Lion again!*

Then, there was this popular belief among Jews at the time that the Messiah would come and throw the Gentiles out of the Temple, but what does Jesus do? He clears the Temple court to make room for the Gentiles. The opposite of what some expected Jesus to do.

Not only is Jesus clearing the court, He’s throwing over the tables of the sacrificial system and saying, “Gentiles, can now go to God directly in prayer.” And then at Easter, Jesus, *the Lamb of God*, will make that possible. He will

replace the bankrupt sacrificial system He had set up by being the final sacrifice and the only sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world: Gentiles and Jews. *Hosanna!*

Certainly Jesus made a lot of commotion at the beginning of Passover week: riding in on a young donkey, not a war horse, healing people, throwing over the furniture of the sacrificial system. Why do you think He did that? I think it's to get our attention. And, to get the attention of the people back then. The force He used, and He did use force, was to open the temple for prayer, not to wipe out Roman occupation. What is a priest's role? They are supposed to point the way to God, right? And help people to see what God is doing in their lives and the world. (Ezekiel 44:23) Jesus was cleaning the temple of all that kept people from knowing His loving Father.

And Jesus comes saying, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." He says, "He came to do God's will." He said, "He came to glorify the Father." He wants people to know Him, so they can know His Father's love for them. Because of Jesus death and resurrection sin is defeated and we can now enter God's loving presence. *Hosanna, Jesus! We need that now!*

And what happens? Immediately when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple in front of the Holy of Holies tore from top to bottom. As if God is saying, "There. It is DONE! The separation between God and man is over." How? Because Jesus, the Lamb, was the

sacrifice that paid for all the sins that separate us from God. The sacrificial system wasn't needed anymore. It was bankrupt and now obsolete.

At Easter, Jesus the Lion and the Lamb offers you and me the opportunity to enter into the presence of God. Not the opportunity to get stuck in the outer courts with all the distractions and hindrances of life. Since we can approach God directly, I invite you this week to approach Easter with a prayer inviting God's Holy Spirit to fill all of you.

In God's presence more than anything else, we will find what our heart desires. We find what the Hebrew people were looking for from the Messiah: *shalom*. A Hebrew word for absolute flourishing, well-being, fulfillment, and joy! No, it's not a constant feeling, though it will be in heaven. But when we grow in our relationship with God now, there are times when we just know things will be OK, because we're with our Father.

I know quite a few seniors in our community facing the statistics of dying if they acquire Covid-19 and when I've asked, they've said to me something like, "Well, I do want to go to heaven someday, so I've got to go somehow." *Shalom! That's true faith!* That's knowing there is something bigger than this, a bigger story of God's love for us, shown in Jesus.

But, if you're not feeling that today, I get that. I don't want to go to heaven now, but I still need a bigger story for my life than what I'm told on the Evening News is the lead story of the day.

Palm Sunday tells me that bigger story. It says even before we make room for God in our lives, He has been pursuing us with His love. He's been moving the furniture around to get ready for us.

It's because of His holy love for us that He got this Triumphal rescue plan underway. Sin and death, sickness and despair, need not be the lead story in our lives, because Jesus, the Lion and the Lamb, has died for us, so we can enjoy the love of our Father *forever!*

Closing Prayer

Father God, We are thankful You not only forgive us (1 John 1:9), but that You wash us off (1 John 1:9) and set our feet in a new place. (Ephesians 2:6) We thank You for Your love and mercy.

Father God, we are not defeated by sin or death.

When we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are born again (John 3:1-21), seen through the blood of the Lamb, holy (Heb. 10:10), and right with God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

Oh Father, what a privilege You have given us.

Thank You Jesus for Your unimaginable sacrifice on our behalf. Help us now in our lives to live this righteousness and joy You want for us. In Jesus Name. Amen.