

A Different Kind of King

Sermon by John Strommen on John 11:12-26, 19:16b-22 Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Here's an interesting little fun fact about the palms we wave every Palm Sunday. Matthew, Mark and Luke mention no palms being waved as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Only in the gospel of John do palms get waved. For John, this detail highlights the fact that the people in Jerusalem were attempting to coronate a political savior, a "warrior king" just like King David centuries earlier. But John, the writer, is about to show us that the king the people seek in Jesus is indeed a king, but quite unlike any they are expecting.

You see, in a situation like this where there is something akin to a spontaneous coronation going on, a warrior king would enter Jerusalem riding a stallion, a warhorse. Well, Jesus is riding no animal at first, but after the palms have been waved, Jesus will find a young donkey, sit on it and ride it. It is quite likely more than a few palms were laid down at this time as people looked at each other and said, "huh? A donkey?"

Oh yes, Jesus rides a donkey in the other Gospels, for sure, but in the other Gospels, Jesus finds the donkey before he rides in the parade and the "Hosannas" begin. Only in John does Jesus find and ride the donkey *after he has entered* and people have already shouted "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Jesus, we need to get you a proper stallion!" So you get this complete 180. The donkey coming after the palms are waved is John's way of framing the donkey as a corrective to the popular perception of Jesus as a political messiah and warrior king. The donkey then would only confuse everyone, including the disciples themselves.

Jesus is not a political messiah and warrior king. He is, rather, the king who embodies the vision of Zech. 9, where it says, "triumphant and victorious is he/humble and riding on a donkey...he will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem...then the Lord will appear over them," "On that day the Lord their God will save them."

So you see, Jesus comes not as conquering hero, but as the presence of God among them – indeed, a presence that will save them from their warhorses, tools of destruction and warlike ways. Is it any wonder the crowd turned on him? They were expecting a king with a bit of worldly muscle. The man they thought would be the next King David is put to death without a fight. The one thought to be a savior sent from God is killed like a common criminal.

And so, in just days after the palms were waved, Jesus would be a defeated and dying man on the cross, with the sarcastic inscription above him, "King of the Jews." So with not an ounce of resistance by the king or even one of his followers engaging in battle, this all kind of refutes his kingship, doesn't it? It did for the crowd. Yet for the writer of the fourth Gospel, there is irony in the fact that the sign is absolutely correct, but in ways no one there understood! Contrary to his death disqualifying Jesus to be king, it is Jesus' death that *establishes* him as king, and as God's presence on earth.

It's as simple as this: for us to be saved, God had to die.

Which is why Jesus said shortly after entering Jerusalem, “The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified,” but he didn’t mean coronations and parties and honors and awards. He meant dying. But what could be less glorious, more gruesome and more soul crushing, than a man’s crucifixion – especially a man who would be king?

Glory here, however, means that God’s heart is revealed, God’s love comes to full expression, God’s will is fulfilled. And our relationship to God changes forever. God is invested in our existence even in its most desperate state.

Jesus also said shortly after they all waved palms, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, *when I am lifted up from the earth*, will draw all people to myself.” And when he’s talking about being “lifted up from the earth,” he doesn’t mean heaven, he means being lifted up on a cross. When he is *up on the cross*, he will draw all people to himself. We will be gathered all over again, and there we will find a God who, as one of us, bears *with us and for us* all the brokenness and pain that we do...so that that brokenness won’t crush us...so that we will never be alone...so that life will rise again and death will not claim us.

At this point, it’s worth reminding ourselves where our story began and why this intervention was necessary. The very first story in the Bible about humans is where Adam and Eve try to become more like God. With the serpents’ help, they learn to distrust God. “Maybe God is holding us back,” they think, “to make us dependent on him. What if we really don’t need God very much?” And like Icarus with artificial wings who flew too high and too close to the sun, Adam and Eve’s attempt at upward flight to God melted away their wings of deluded aspiration. The result was a crash landing that left them spiritually maimed and just as doomed as Icarus. Humans trying to upgrade to God’s level didn’t work then and it doesn’t work now. It wasn’t an upgrade, didn’t make us better, only made us worse and also brought a curse: *from dust you came and to dust you will return*.

Most people think that our salvation is won by us becoming more like God, when it’s actually the opposite. It’s recognizing that we can’t ascend, but God can descend, and that is our salvation. It’s not whether we can climb the ladder of righteousness and prove our mettle; rather, it’s whether we are open to the gift of God *with us*.

Today we see in its most pure form what people really need. Not becoming more like God. On the contrary, God becoming more like us. Even *becoming* us, experiencing the worst that we can experience. That includes - we are reminded today - dying in the worst possible way: a slow, sadistic death where just about everyone abandons you. When God decided to become one of us, God went all the way. Why on earth would a God elect to do such a thing?

Because the world we’ve created for ourselves is born out of the distrust in God we first saw in Adam and Eve, and extends to our attempts to play God or prove how good we are. As a result, we are broken. Broken to pieces just like Humpty Dumpty, which is a brilliant fable about the brokenness of human beings. “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.” And you know Humpty’s prognosis right? “All the kings’ horses – and even the warhorses - and all the kings’ men couldn’t put humpty dumpty together again.”

So if this is the mess we're in, why would God become Humpty Dumpty and become broken beyond repair, even unto death? Because God loves us, God wants to gather us again, and restore the relationship between God and us. And that relationship can only be restored by one word: trust. Or faith, which means pretty much the same thing. The faith, the trust, to let God be God and carry our burdens. To let God be God and give to us the abundant life that comes from God and is greater even than death. This isn't so much something we do as it is a state of being.

And so, in the midst of our trying human existence, people may assure us that we should just trust God, you know. Which prompts the question from most people, "How do I know I can trust God?"

Well, look at the cross.

Or this question: "How do I know God cares about what I go through?"

Look at the cross.

Or this question: "How can God understand what I go through? After all, God is God, way up there!"

Look at the cross.

Jesus' death literally has the power to restore faith and trust, to recreate our relationship with God.

For John, Jesus' passion is not proof that he is no king, but the very reason he is the true king.

And then, after three days, something wonderful happened. Amen.