

**THE RETURN OF THE KING****LUKE 19:28-40**

I love the trilogy written by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the movies based on them as well. The last book, *The Return of the King*, has a pivotal scene. Aragorn, the rightful king of the west, has long labored in obscurity, forgoing kingly comforts to serve his subjects and fight their battles, repeatedly risking his life for them. At last he prevails over the forces of the dark lord, Sauron, and is poised to enter the city where he will rule at last. When Aragorn enters the fortified city of Minas Tirith for the first time as king, the city's steward proclaims Aragorn's royal pedigree for all the citizens to hear: "Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dunedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Valandil, Isildur's son, Elendil's son of Numenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?"

Palm Sunday is about the return of another King who also long labored in obscurity: unheralded, humbly serving the people over whom he had every right to reign, laying down his life for them. Back then and today He claims the throne of your life and mine. Here is Jesus the Christ, the Second Adam, the Bright and Morning Star, the First and the Last, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, Mighty Second Person of the Trinity, Son of David, Son of Man, Word of God Incarnate, the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Shall he enter our hearts—and our church—and dwell there? That's what Palm Sunday is all about.

For hundreds of years now, Christians all over the world mark today as the beginning of Holy Week which culminates next Sunday with Easter. We believe it's the single most important week in human history. Nearly 2,000 years ago, this week was ground zero for God's mission to bring a lost world of people back into a relationship with Him. One story found in all four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) is the focal point of Palm Sunday – what's referred to as the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. Was this the first time Jesus had ever visited Jerusalem? No, He had been there many times before. What made it "triumphal"? We'll get to that in a few minutes. Why is it called "Palm Sunday"? Because some of the people greeted Jesus as He entered the city by waving palm branches in celebration. I want to read Luke's version of the story today, which – oddly enough – doesn't mention palm branches at all. Matthew, Mark and John all mention palms, but not Luke for some unknown reason. This passage caused me to ask myself three questions. First, ...

**DOES GOD'S WORD MATTER TO ME ABOVE ALL?**

The Word of God – the Bible – was very important to Jesus. For example, when Jesus was being tempted by the devil, he quoted a verse from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. "But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matt. 4:4 NLT) Jesus was also very much aware that His coming into the world was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He knew that He was the chosen Messiah – the One God was

going to use to provide salvation to everyone in the world. It was generally acknowledged that Zechariah 9:9 (NLT) depicted something that the future Messiah would do. “Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey’s colt.” Doesn’t that paint a picture that’s very close to what we just read in Luke 19? It was also acknowledged that some of the verses in Psalm 118 pointed to the future Messiah. “The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing, and it is wonderful to see.... Please, Lord, please save us. Please, Lord, please give us success. Bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.” (Ps 118: 22-23, 25-26 NLT) Those were the words that the crowd used in Luke 19 to welcome Jesus into the city: “Blessings on the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!” (Luke 19:38 NLT)

This remarkable story begins by Jesus instructing two of his disciples to go and get a young donkey and bring it to Him so He could ride the animal into the city. Now, it’s easy to assume that this is an example of Jesus’ ability to perform miracles. Mysteriously, Jesus knew that a certain donkey lived in a nearby village. Supernaturally, He knew the animal’s owner would just hand it over to the two disciples once they used the phrase, “The Lord needs it.” Is that possible? Sure, but I think there’s a better explanation. I think Jesus intentionally prearranged the use of this animal with its owner, because He knew exactly what He wanted to do just a few days before His crucifixion and resurrection. He wanted to enter Jerusalem in an unmistakable way that fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah completely. That explanation also makes better sense of why the owner would let two strangers – the disciples – just walk off with his donkey. If Jesus and the owner had decided in advance on a kind of password when the time came to use the donkey – a phrase like “the Lord needs it” – then the owner would have recognized the password, so to speak, and gladly released his donkey to the disciples’ care.

What we have here, then, is an example of how important it was to Jesus to fulfill Old Testament prophecy right down to the very last letter. It reveals His attitude towards the Word of God – the Bible. The questions I find myself asking are these: Do I have the same respect for and attitude towards God’s Word that I see in Jesus? How important is the Bible to me? True, there aren’t specific prophecies about me in the Bible, but if Jesus was that concerned about God’s Word, am I that concerned about God’s Word?

Let me suggest two ways that you and I can respect and make God’s Word vitally important like Jesus, our Lord, did. First, consume God’s Word regularly. Think of the Bible as food. I have a friend who compares reading the Bible to God’s gift of manna for the people of Israel in the Old Testament – a strange but nutritious, bread like substance. The people were told to collect fresh manna – fresh bread – every day. Any leftovers from yesterday’s manna would actually spoil and be inedible. You are never going to reach a place this side of Heaven when you no longer need to consume God’s Word. You need fresh bread. Eat God’s Word. Read it. Listen to it. Memorize it. Study it. Marinate in it. Journal about it. Pray it back to God. How often do you

consume a portion of this book? Daily? Several times a week? Twice a year whether you need it or not? Never? Jesus' intentional set-up of His own triumphal entry into Jerusalem points to the fact that He had infinite respect for and knowledge of His Father's Word. If you're His follower, you will consume God's Word regularly.

Secondly, obey God's Word completely. That's the whole reason to consume God's Word regularly. The Bible itself puts it like this, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it." (Jam 1:22-25 NLT) True, the Bible doesn't give you instruction in every conceivable area of life, but it sure is capable of addressing many issues clearly and plainly. For instance, it tells us how to do sex God's way. It tells us what to do when someone offends us. It tells us to care about the poor and those who are treated unjustly. Those aren't just opinions or suggestions you can pick and choose from. We don't retain some right to select the parts of God's Word we like and discard those we don't. No, it's not enough just to believe Jesus lived, died and rose again. To be a follower of Jesus means making an effort to obey God's Word completely because Jesus obeyed God's Word completely. He made sure to fulfill everything it said. If you're a follower of Jesus, you will obey God's Word completely. Second, ...

### **DOES GOD'S MISSION MATTER TO ME ABOVE ALL?**

The mission of God was as important to Jesus as the Word of God. He rode that donkey into Jerusalem five days before His crucifixion with full knowledge of what was going to happen to Him and why. I want you to recognize the courage of Jesus. He could have remained safe back up north in Galilee or perhaps in the desert areas south of Jerusalem. He could have just walked away, but instead He freely chose to fulfill His part in His Father's plan. He entered the city on that day to die – to suffer the physical torture of the cross, to endure spiritual separation from His Father, and to pay the penalty for your sin and mine. Some scholars tell us that over 200,000 lambs were herded into the city of Jerusalem just a few days before the Jewish Passover. They were to be sacrificed at the Temple for the sins of the people. Those same scholars suggest that these lambs might well have been streaming down the streets and alleys of Jerusalem at the exact same moment when Jesus entered the city. Can you imagine that picture – thousands of sacrificial lambs and in their midst the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Jesus displayed absolute allegiance to God's mission above all even when it required of Him the ultimate sacrifice.

Here's the question I ask myself: Do I have the same attitude as Jesus towards God's mission? Do I really? The Bible makes it very clear that every follower of Jesus has been given the same mission by God. You and I are called to point other people to Jesus with our lips and our lives. Not just pastors, or church staff, or church leaders. Each of us and all of us. In other words, we need to be prepared every day to say something about Jesus or do something in the name of Jesus that bears witness to the

fact that you believe He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. That's God's Plan A; there really is no Plan B! If you consider yourself a follower of Jesus this morning, your primary and ultimate mission in life is not to have a successful career followed by a leisurely retirement. It's not to be a great spouse or a great parent. It's not to be good provider for your family or to be a good citizen. How did Jesus put it again? "Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Matt 28:19 NLT)

Some of Jesus followers will indeed go to other nations to make disciples for Jesus. I think of Kim Brown in Thailand today and Emerson and Ivy Wu in Macau, China. Others of us will go next door, or to the next office or the next classroom. I believe our church is called to go and make disciples of men, women, boys and girls who live primarily in the Northland part of Columbus. I've said a lot in recent months about our church becoming a turnaround church which is simply a congregation where an increasing number of people put their faith in Jesus and want to grow to spiritual maturity. Lately, I've just felt God has been pushing us as a church and me as a pastor back to what I call "Christianity 101." Help people already here become more fully devoted followers of Jesus. Remember that an essential part of being Jesus' follower is pointing people to Jesus so help, train and equip people here to do that. When people do begin to follow Jesus, help them to grow in their devotion to Jesus. It's basically discipleship and evangelism. Simple, basic Christianity. Will we become a turnaround church? I don't know. I hope so. I pray so. I work hard towards that result as do many others in this place. But I'm also convinced it will only ever truly happen if you, and you, and you and I start to have the same attitude towards God's mission that Jesus did. Sure, we're taking some intentional steps in that direction and all of that, but it has to be more than some slick program. It really starts with a personal surrender to a Holy Spirit-given attitude and mindset by you, and you and you and me. "Lord, please give me the same attitude towards Your mission that Jesus had!"

I've told you about Ben Stone before. Every time I read the story of Jesus' triumphal entry I can't help but be reminded of him. I got acquainted with Ben when I did some volunteer work in his ministry to runaway boys when I was in college. Ben wasn't a great intellect. He wasn't a Bible scholar. He wasn't a gifted administrator. He was kind of red-neck, to be honest. But Ben loved Jesus and he loved troubled boys and young men because he himself had a rough time in his teenage years. When he was in Bible college – from which he never graduated – he poured out his heart to God one night wondering if God would use him in some way to point people to Jesus. Ben told me that night God reminded him of this story of the triumphal entry and that little donkey that carried Jesus into Jerusalem. Ben felt as if God spoke directly into his spirit that night with this message, "Ben, if I can use a donkey, I can use you!" How's that for "a call to ministry"? I lost track of Ben and his ministry. He might be in Heaven now for all I know. But I have no doubt there are going to be some men in Heaven because Ben Stone pointed them to Jesus when they were troubled, runaway teenagers and got them started on the road to being Jesus' disciples.

Will anyone be in Heaven because of you? I don't ask that question to shame you, demean you or discourage you. Instead, I want to motivate you and challenge you in a positive way. I just know after being a pastor now longer than I want to admit that Christian people throw out two excuses why God can't, shouldn't, or won't use them to point other people to Jesus. The first excuse is just sheer unwillingness. It just never shows up on your personal radar of what matters in life. Too busy! Too this! Too that! It's always the job of other Christians, not you. But the second excuse might surprise you. It's unworthiness. You committed too many big sins for God to ever use you. You're not even close to being perfect now, so how can God use you? You're just not smart enough, you don't know enough Bible verses, or whatever. May I suggest that you let the Holy Spirit say to you what He said to Ben Stone? "If I can use a donkey, I can use you!" A third and final question is this one...

### **DOES JESUS BEING MY KING MATTER TO ME ABOVE ALL?**

This whole story of Jesus' triumphal entry underlines an important truth about who Jesus is. "Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt." (Zech 9:9 NLT). Yes, to be sure, Jesus came to die and pay the penalty for our sins. But, when Jesus rode that donkey down the streets of Jerusalem – make no mistake – He was acknowledging the fact that He was and is the King. The fact that the donkey Jesus chose for that occasion was one which had never been ridden before means that Jesus was selecting it for a special and holy purpose. Jesus certainly was and is humble. But the way He rode into Jerusalem was not necessarily an act of humility. It was actually a statement. It was an acknowledgement. Bible scholars tell us that back in Jesus' day, kings often deliberately chose to ride on a donkey instead of a horse when they came in a time of peace. When they came to make war, yes, they rode a horse. But when they came in peace, they rode a donkey. Jesus wasn't coming as some military hero to free the Jewish people from Rome's tyranny. He came instead to make peace between God and human beings through His own shed blood. Jesus saw the triumphal entry as the return of the rightful King of the universe to the city of Jerusalem to make and proclaim the peace of God.

Jesus knew then – and knows full well now - that He's the rightful ruler and the supreme authority in the universe. The way He entered Jerusalem points to that truth. And the Bible says this about Jesus, "Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil 2:9-11 NLT) The question is not whether Jesus knows He is the King, but instead the question is this: Do I fully acknowledge Jesus' Kingship over me?

The people of Jerusalem on that day are a good reminder that we can be pretty fickle when it comes to recognizing Jesus as Lord and King. Oh, they treated Jesus like a King that day! The shouts of "Hosanna," the waving of palm branches, and the donkey carrying Jesus over their garments were all words and actions you would offer to a King.

But it's evident that many of those who greeted Jesus as King that day had no real personal understanding or appreciation of His authority. It's highly probable that some of these very same people cheering and celebrating Jesus were among those who were yelling, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" just five days later. We're not told, but I wonder if some of those people turned on Jesus because He refused to be the kind of King they wanted. They wanted someone to kick out the Romans. It reminds me of how often we try and force Jesus to be the kind of King we want Him to be instead of simply yielding our lives to His authority. You don't tell a King how to be King. You just submit to His Lordship. As we leave that amazing scene we've explored today – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – and move into Holy Week itself, the question that lingers deserves an answer. Yes, Jesus is your Savior. But is Jesus your King? Do you even know what that means – how all-inclusive it is? Do you acknowledge His authority over every single area of your life? Does Jesus being your King matter to you above all?

By the time she went to college, Michelle Akers had become a soccer star, earning ESPN's woman athlete of the year award in 1985—the same year the United States formed its first women's national soccer team. Michelle was a starter. In 1991, the U.S. team won the first-ever women's World Cup and Michelle scored 10 goals in five games, including the championship game's winner. She signed an endorsement deal and became the first woman soccer player to have a paid sponsor. She played professionally in Sweden. She even tried out as a field goal kicker for the Dallas Cowboys. Her longest attempt reached 52 yards.

But just as her star was rising, Michelle's health was declining. By 1993, the woman who used grit and determination to make life happen found her life unmanageable. She suffered from Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS), a debilitating disease affecting more than a million adult Americans. For the first time, Michelle could no longer count on her old friends—strength and hard work. She couldn't bear not to be the best in the world, not to be the one who could bounce back from any injury. When her marriage of four years broke up in 1994, Michelle had reached the end of herself. She was so sick she couldn't take a five-minute walk without needing two days on the couch to recover. She was forced to spend a lot of time thinking about who she was and she didn't like what she saw.

Michelle had put her trust in Christ as a high-school student, but ignored God in college and after graduation. Now sick and alone, Michelle reluctantly accepted an invitation from her strength coach to attend his church. Although she couldn't articulate it at the time, in retrospect Michelle says she knew she needed to get things right with God. Looking back now, she think God was gently, patiently tapping her on the shoulder and calling her name for years. But she continuously brushed Him off, saying, "Hey, I know what I'm doing. I can make these decisions. Leave me alone. Then I think He finally said, 'Okay,' crossed His arms and looked at me sadly—because He knew I was going to make a lot of mistakes by ignoring Him. It took total devastation before I would acquiesce and say, 'Okay, God. You can have my life. Please, help me.'"

Perhaps we've suffered as Americans by being completely unfamiliar with having a king. Instead, we have political leaders who we can vote in and out of office. They take opinion polls so they can figure out how to get re-elected by us. A king doesn't take opinion polls. He doesn't ask for your vote. He expects you to submit to him and do life his way. He doesn't exist to serve you. You exist to serve him. As you enter Holy Week today, may I leave you with these questions: Is Jesus your King? Is every area of your life submitted to Him, available to Him, and surrendered to Him?