

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It happens fairly frequently in history, the powerful rulers with great ambition and drive, and also great motivational skills, lead nations to be able to do great things. Why is it that people are so ready to rally around a strong leader that has great confidence? Well, it's exciting, isn't it? Such leaders promise sweeping changes, new power, prosperity, and whatever else it is that they think they can deliver on. History has shown that sometimes these leaders do accomplish great things for the benefit of their people. History also shows that a strong leader can lead people down a road of destruction.

Today is Palm Sunday. Today we follow a strong, charismatic leader – Jesus – on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. These days, more and more people are speaking out against Jesus. They believe and vocally declare that the many people who have followed him have followed him to their harm, and the harm of society. Is Jesus a leader worth following? Why? What's he going to accomplish as he enters Jerusalem there? These are the questions we want to consider today.

To begin with, let's put ourselves in the sandals of a pilgrim traveling to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration on that first Palm Sunday. The Passover festival was one of the three major religious festivals in the Jewish calendar. And if you could swing it, ideally you would celebrate that festival in Jerusalem. It was a celebration of God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt... an ancient festival that even in Jesus' day had been celebrated for over 1400 years.

So, you're nearing Jerusalem for the great festival. The closer you get, the more travelers join with you as everyone converges on Jerusalem. The roads are full of people walking, talking, sing Psalms. Strangers greet each other and begin to talk. And all the buzz seems to be about this charismatic teacher named Jesus. Some talk about his teaching... with authority! He knows what he's talking about! He preached about repentance... changing thoughts and actions from sin and to God. He talked about God's salvation. And perhaps most amazing, he was said to be the long-promised Messiah.

Other people are talking about his miracles. Some heard how he fed 5,000 people with hardly any food. Another claims he actually saw a lame man get up and walk. But most of all everyone is talking about a man named Lazarus whom Jesus actually raised from the dead just a week or so earlier. Really! The man had been in the grave for four days... there were hundreds of witnesses. Then this Jesus came along and called out to him... and he walked out of that grave still wrapped up in the burial clothes.

So, your excitement builds as you near Jerusalem, because you just keep hearing more stories about Jesus. You near the mount of Olives just east of Jerusalem, you can't wait to crest the hill and see the Holy city Jerusalem beneath. But you're distracted from your thoughts about Jerusalem by an ever increasing noise. A large crowd has gathered.

You run to see what's going on, and you see everyone slowly moving toward Jerusalem surrounding a man riding on a young donkey. Someone nearby shouts, "It's Jesus!"

You pause and think... "Jesus? The Messiah? Isn't he to be a great leader? Isn't he to free us from the hand of our enemies? This isn't what I was expecting. He seems so calm and peaceful. He's not at all stirring up the people and rallying them to himself. And what's with the donkey? A chariot would be more appropriate... and I'd think he'd have a small army that he's gathered." As your mind quickly reviews what Law, the Psalms and the Prophets say about the Messiah, for some reason, Zechariah 9:9-10 pops into your mind. **"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses 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."** Your heart leaps as you recognize this unusual entrance into Jerusalem as the fulfillment of prophecy. He is the Messiah! He is the King!

You run to meet the Messiah. You join the people praising him. Psalm 118 comes to mind because it's a Psalm about God's love and God's deliverance from our enemies, so you use those words. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! O Lord, save us!"

You along with the other people want to honor your new king. Someone says, "A dirt road is not worthy of our king! Lay down your cloaks along the road he will ride on. Cut down some Palm branches and put them on the road too! We must make a path worthy of our king!" The donkey is soon walking on a soft cushion of cloaks and palm branches.

Now, the problem is... what kind of salvation do you have in mind? What kind of deliverance from enemies are you thinking about? What kind of king do you think you have here? Odds are, you're thinking of a strong king and Savior who will rescue Israel from Roman oppression. You're thinking of a Messiah who will return Israel to the glory days under king David. You're thinking of a King that will give every person in Israel enough food to eat, good health, security and happiness.

5 days pass. You've heard Jesus speak in the temple courtyard... but nothing about fighting the Romans. Then you hear on the street. "Jesus was captured and found guilty of blasphemy by the religious leaders. They took him to the Roman leader, Pilate, asking him to sentence Jesus to death. He didn't speak in his defense. No rallying cry to the masses. In fact, you see your own leaders want him dead. And if *they* want him dead, then clearly this Jesus has no intention of leading the people against the Romans. Friday morning you head to the Praetorium courtyard. When Jesus appears, the religious leaders start the chant, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" He's not the king you had in mind. You join in the chants. "Crucify him!"

Do you think this scenario is impossible? Are you certain you would never have chanted "crucify him" with the others in that crowd? Are you certain you would have identified Jesus as the promised Messiah AND understood the kind of deliverance he came to bring?

Ah, but we have the benefit of hindsight, don't we? Hindsight is 20/20, right? And yet do we really trust Jesus as our King? And if we do, do we trust him as the kind of King he really is?

Now I want you to be honest here. Can you think of a time in your life when you kind of got mad at God? Maybe you got REALLY mad at God and stopped coming to church for a while. Maybe you were just kind of disappointed with God because of what was happening in your life. You didn't stop coming to church, but still... you had to wonder what God was thinking in allowing the circumstances in your life. Have you ever been there?

I have. Probably more often than I care to admit, I can identify times in my life when I was feeling, "God, why? Why are you allowing this? Why are you doing this? This isn't good. This isn't right. DO SOMETHING!" I felt that way when someone I cared about deeply died. I felt that way when my checking account got more than drained by an unexpected expense. I felt that way when I was injured and unable to do all the things I wanted to do. I felt that way when I had a specific plan and goal in mind – a GREAT plan that would accomplish just the goal I needed. But then a turn of events I never could have anticipated came up and completely destroyed my plan and forced me to change my goal.

I have specific instances in my mind, but I've kept my descriptions purposely vague in the hopes that you will better associate with the specific instances that have been or currently are happening in your life. What is it that has made you ask, "Why, God?!"

Friends, when we feel this way, we are doing *exactly* as the travelers did on that journey into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Praise Jesus and shout his name when you think he's doing or going to do what you think he should do. When he's the kind of king who's ruling and accomplishing what *you* want... sing his praises! But when he turns out to be a different kind of king, shout "Crucify him!" Or shout from the ache in your heart, "Why, God! Why this? Why now? Why *me*? You don't know what you're doing! Just what kind of king are you, anyway?"

Oh, the sad truth is we're way too much like those first century followers of Jesus on that first Palm Sunday, aren't we? But here's the good news. Jesus isn't the King and Savior we want. Jesus is the King and Savior that we truly need. In spite of what those followers of Jesus WANTED in the Messiah, Jesus came to earth in order to be the kind of Messiah they truly needed. They may have thought their biggest enemy was the Romans who oppressed them. But Jesus knew their biggest enemies were... Satan who tempted them to rebel against God and revolt against the King. And sin which threatened to disqualify them from being citizens of heaven... and **death** both physical and eternal.

And so Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem that day intent to do battle and deliver a victory... the one we really need. He ignored people expectations and desires and instead kept resolutely on the path that lead to real deliverance from the real enemies. He took our disobedience and bad thoughts... our lack of faith in God's goodness and lack of trust in his plans for our life... he took those sins off of us and upon himself. He marched to meet his earthly enemies in Gethsemane so that he could meet our spiritual enemies on the cross. There he did battle with Satan himself. Beaten, bruised, bloodied and pierced, Satan thought he had the victory when Jesus breathed his last.

But his death was the payment for our sin. And the payment was made in full. Jesus rose on the third day victorious. Satan was defeated... he can no longer accuse us before God because of our wrongs. Jesus took them away! Sin was defeated... it can no longer separate us from God for eternity! Death was defeated. The Holy Spirit has already breathed new life into us as he created faith in our hearts. And by the same power that raised Jesus' body from the grave, our bodies will rise on the last day to live eternally in happiness, sin-free, for all eternity.

We've got a lot to celebrate this Palm Sunday which launches Holy Week. We have much to thank God for this holy week, and I pray you will gather again here on Maundy Thursday, on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday. We are reliving the story of our King... the King we really need. Shout for joy to our king! Prepare the way for him! Hosanna! He saves! Praise his holy name! Amen.