

Palm Sunday
April 17, 2011

Rejoice Greatly! Your King Comes to You

Pastor Michael Ewart
Zechariah 9:9-10

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

People say that if your aim is *not* to offend someone, there are two general topics you want to stay away from: politics and religion. Well, you come here knowing full well that you're going to hear the religion part. So you can't complain about that. But those of you who have been here a while and have heard a number of my sermons... you know very well that you have never heard me bring up politics from the pulpit. Now someone will come up to me afterwards and say, "Yes you did, Pastor! Remember when... But I'm just saying that to the best of my recollection, I don't ever remember talking politics! But today is different. At the risk of offending some, I'm starting the sermon today by talking politics. But I'm doing so because I have a spiritual point that I want to make, so please don't get up and leave until you've heard me out.

Ok, so here is the political statement I wish to make that you may find offensive... especially those of you here today who are Americans! Here it is: I don't believe democracy is the best form of government. It's true. I don't believe democracy is the best form of government. So what is the best? Get ready. I believe a benevolent dictatorship is the best form of government. [Repeat.] By benevolent dictatorship, I mean that if the dictator or king is good and kind, knowledgeable and wise, just and right, experienced and gifted... if the dictator has the best interests of his people and security and prosperity of his country always in mind... if the dictator were committed to granting liberty and justice to all people... that would be the best form of government. And I didn't come up with this idea myself. I was taught this by a college history professor who told me himself: the best form of government is a benevolent dictatorship... but he always added, "As long as I'm the dictator."

Now here's why I say it: government for the people and by the people is good in concept, but often times "the people" are ignorant. And I don't say that in an insulting way. They simply don't know what they need to know to make informed, good and right decisions. "The people" are shortsighted and self-interested. "The people" will do what's good for them now. This doesn't make for good long-term planning, or sacrifice "now" for the good of "then." Democracy is also frequently crippled by differing points of view. Yes, differing points of view are also the strength of democracy, but when something must be decided and a tough decision made for the good of all... a democracy often can't get it done.

Now, to tone down all I've said: I can't think of a single example in modern history when a dictator was actually benevolent and that this form of government worked better than a democracy. So please understand I'm talking in the theoretical. The fact is, such a benevolent dictator probably doesn't exist here on earth. And even if he did, as the saying goes: Absolute power corrupts absolutely. I love our American democratic system, and I think it's the best form of government for us in a real world... and that's the world we're stuck in.

But the reason I bring all of this up is to make a spiritual application. Listen: are we citizens of the Kingdom of God? Or citizens of the democratic republic of God? [Repeat.] Do you see that there is a vital difference between the two? If we are citizens of the democratic republic of God, then we have no real king, and in fact the idea of a king is repulsive. We have freedom and independence from authorities that dictate right and wrong. I get a say in the way things go. I get to participate in calling the shots and making the laws. I get to complain against God and vote him or

his decisions out. Satan makes this sound appealing to us. In fact, it's what prompted him to rebel against God in the first place.

But when you look at your past history and your current problems, do you see the problems that have been created when you had the attitude that you are part of the democratic republic of God? How often did your way turn out to be a bad way? How did you feel when you were complaining against God and his "policies?" Did that seem to work for you? Exercising your independence, were you really able to solve that huge problem that came into your life? Could you do it yourself? Or were you overwhelmed and defeated? And how has the battle with sin gone when you took it up on your own? Have you singlehandedly been able to remove your past mistakes and resolve your guilt? Or can you acknowledge that you need help?

Friends, on this Palm Sunday, I have good news for you... your relationship to God is not a democratic republic. Today we rejoice because our KING comes. Let's take a closer look at what kind of King we have and also the resulting Kingdom he rules over. And I bet you'll agree that in the case of God's eternal governance, a benevolent dictatorship is without question the best!

Some 500 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Zechariah foretold a most unusual king... and a most needed king. He foretold the king that you and I need! We are in danger. We are helpless. Our disobedience to God has separated us from him, and we are on a path leading to our eternal destruction. We are under attack from all sides, and being pulled further and further from God. What we really need is a super powerful king who can sweep in to defeat our enemies and rescue us from a helpless situation. And here's what Zechariah said:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! [We'll come back to that part.] **See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation**

Pay attention to every word! In our hopeless situation of sin and death, we need a **King**. A powerful King. So that's what God provides. Our king **comes to you!** More good news! You don't have to seek him out, or vote him in. He comes to you. By his action and his decision he helps you and rescues you! He is **righteous**. This king is holy and perfect. This king is what God is looking for. If this king is going to help us with our disobedience, he himself must be righteous. And he is! And he comes **having salvation**. Salvation means rescue from a dangerous, hopeless situation. Jesus is our powerful King who does just that. He will defeat our enemies and give us peace. But he'll be different:

[Your king comes to you] gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. People who love authority, popularity and prestige announce themselves by their ride. The stars showing up Oscar night don't drive up in old beater. They come in a limo. In ancient times, if you wanted to make a similar statement, you would ride in on a war horse... or in a chariot. But this king comes to **gentle and riding on a donkey**. The Hebrew word for "gentle" means lowly, bowed down, full of suffering and punishment. A great king that is humble, lowly and suffering? What a strange image. But perhaps the people who heard this would have been reminded of Isaiah's words, **"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."** This king would rescue and save through humiliation and silence. Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Through his quiet obedience and willingness to take the fall for our mistakes, he conquered. He rescued. He defeated our enemies: Satan, sin and death. On this Palm Sunday, we say, "Hail to the King!" Hosanna in the highest!

This unusual King is the exact kind of king we need. And he ushers in a Kingdom that is exactly what we need as well. Listen to Zechariah's description:

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.

This king destroys the war implements. Chariots. Horses. Battle bows. No longer needed because this king brings peace.

Years ago, the man who invented the atomic bomb, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, was asked to testify before a Congressional Committee. They asked him if there was any defense against that destructive weapon. "Certainly," the great physicist replied. "And that would be...? Dr. Oppenheimer looked over the hushed, expectant audience and said softly, "Peace." What can possibly save us from the righteous, just and unstoppable wrath of God? Peace! Peace through sin and guilt removed by our great Lord and King, Jesus.

On this Palm Sunday we remember the shouts and enthusiasm as Jesus entered into Jerusalem at the beginning of that week which would end in his suffering, death and resurrection. But the shouts and praise were mixed with ignorance and misunderstanding. They were enthusiastic, but many for the wrong reason... not understanding who he is.

We gathered here today now understand who this king is, and what kind of Kingdom he established. But our shouts and enthusiasm are perhaps a bit muffled yet. And the reason is that we're not yet set free. We still live in a sinful world. We still have sinful natures. Satan still tempts us and tries to get us to rebel against God daily. We rejoice, but sometimes our joy is dampened.

So I'd like you to do one more thing this Palm Sunday, but it will take some imagination. Would you for a moment imagine the day when we all sit together in the kingdom of heaven in glory. The trials and difficulties and tedium of this world are past. We have received what God promised. We are in paradise. We are happy and blessed. And then this: Jesus our great and gentle king makes his appearance in heavenly glory. Can you imagine the shouts! The joy! The screaming and cheering! Think of the loudest, rockiest sporting event or concert you went to with everyone charged and shouting. And for what? An ultimate meaningless competition. Now imagine a crowd of millions or even billions crowded in anticipation of the Savior Jesus Christ. He appears and the crowd goes wild with joy and shouting and singing! And you're right there too. This is Palm Sunday to perfection! It was also what the prophet Zechariah was foretelling in his prophecy. This is what you have to look forward to!

This Palm Sunday, is a trial run... a practice as Christians gather in their separate groups in thousands of churches all around the world and in small groups like ours, they sing their praises to the King. The shouts and the joy are still a bit muffled. (Partly because many of us are of German descent and we don't show our emotions on the outside.) But mainly because we're not in heaven yet. We don't see Jesus face to face yet. We still are passing through a valley of sin and death. We still suffer in a sinful world in a struggle with a sinful nature. But the joy is there. The peace is there. It's inside and it's hidden away where no one can take it from us!

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week... a week of somber reflection mixed with untold rejoicing. This week is the Christian faith in a nutshell. I don't know what you have planned for this week, but I feel confident in saying this: there is nothing more important than following our Savior as through his last supper, garden, capture, trials, suffering, crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection. If there is any week of the whole year where you absolutely need to be in church, this is it. Don't miss a single service! This is the recharge for your faith that you so desperately need. God is going to bless you through Word and Sacrament this week. All hail our benevolent dictator, our humble and serving Lord and King, Jesus Christ. **"Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"** Amen.