

Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023

MATTHEW 21:1–11. (EHV)

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, telling them, “Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. [Zech. 9:9]

The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting,

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! [Psalm 118:25–26]

Hosanna in the highest!

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, “Who is this?” And the crowds were saying, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Have you stopped to think about the familiar hymn we just sang? “Ride on, ride on.” How do we mean that? Are we giving Jesus a command, as if we were God the Father giving him his mission? “Okay, time to ride on now.” Are we giving him permission, as if we were customs officials at one of Jerusalem’s gates? “Alright, everything looks to be in order. Ride on.”

No, we’re actually putting ourselves in the Palm Sunday crowd and encouraging Jesus and cheering him on. We are encouraging him to ride on in majesty and power and to ride on in humility and gentleness.

1. Ride On in Majesty and Power

We are first cheering him to ride on in majesty. But in order to tell him to ride *on* in majesty, it has to be evident that he is already riding in majesty. What is the evidence for that?

“As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, telling them, ‘Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, “The Lord needs them,” and he will send them at once.’” Bethany and Bethphage were two small villages east of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. Jesus had been in Bethany the day before, and perhaps that’s where he headed out from. Before he got to Bethphage, he dispatched two of his disciples and told them exactly what they were going to find—a female donkey and her colt. He even told them the situation they would encounter, that they would be questioned as they were taking the animals.

So now, as we look at Jesus sitting atop the donkey’s colt, we note that he is riding forth in majesty, in fulfillment of his own prophecy that he had just spoken.

We also note that he is riding in fulfillment of the prophecy he had spoken hundreds of years earlier through the prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament: “Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Note that the prophet said that the Messiah would come to the Daughter of Zion, one of the prophets’ names for Jerusalem. Now here he is, in Bethphage, on his way to Jerusalem.

The prophet also said that he would come as a king. As we look at him, he does not initially seem to fit the description of a king. He looks like an ordinary man. But the crowds are starting to gather around him as they would for a king. The prophet also said that he would come riding on a donkey, more specifically, the colt of a donkey. The Evangelists Mark and Luke tell us not only that Jesus did indeed sit on the colt, but also that this colt had never been sat on before. Yet as Jesus comes riding with the crowds beginning to throng around him, something amazing happens with the colt—nothing.

Those of you who are animal lovers and animal keepers, particularly lovers and keepers of the equine family, you realize better than any of us just how amazing nothing is. I challenge any one of you to get an unbroken colt—I don’t care whether it’s a horse or a burro or a donkey or a pony—and get on him. And stay on him. Wait, not yet. First throw a whole bunch of coats and shirts on him, then gather all the neighbors and have them throw coats and shirts and branches on the road in front of his face, then have them start shouting and singing out loud. Now, with all that happening, get on him and stay on him. I dare you.

Look at Jesus again. The unbroken colt carries him silently, obediently forward, without flinching. Zechariah said that a king would come, friends, but when we see Jesus riding on that colt without any incident, we tremble to realize which king this is. This is *the* king, the King of the world. He sits quietly atop this colt because he made this colt, because he is the colt’s master in every sense of the word.

We also note that he commands obedience from his subjects like a king. He sits on a colt because “the disciples went and did just as Jesus had commanded them.” He didn’t get these donkeys himself; he gave orders and they were willingly and obediently brought to him. And as the two disciples were untying the donkey and her colt, their owners who standing there asked them, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“The Lord needs them,” they replied.

“Okay, take them,” they said.

Jesus commands praise from his subjects like a king. Praise in actions—they not only throw their cloaks on the colt for Jesus to sit on, they also throw their cloaks on the road for the colt to walk on. They constantly go back and forth between the road and the palm trees, cutting down branches. They roll out the green carpet, so to speak.

He commands praise also in words—“The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting, Hosanna to the Son of David!” *Hosanna* was a well-used liturgical word, much like Amen is for us. Amen means *truth*, but it has become such a familiar word that we can say things like, “Amen to that!”, even though we would never say, “Truth to that!” The same goes for *Hosanna*. It was taken from Psalm 118 and originally meant, “Please save us!” But through usage on many occasions it also came to be used as an acclamation of praise. The crowds sing praise to the Son of David, the Messiah, as the one who can save them.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They acknowledge that Jesus comes representing God, that he comes on a mission from God himself.

“Hosanna in the highest!” They give him praise that is only fitting for God himself. “The highest” was a phrase only used for God or in connection with God. “Glory to God in the highest!” the angels sang. Now the crowd encourages all of the heavenly court to sing praise to the one who comes to them on a donkey’s colt. Indeed, he is God himself, the Son of God.

So as we look at Jesus sitting atop the donkey’s colt, commanding obedience and praise from his subjects, we urge him to ride on in majesty and power, not only in fulfillment of his own prophecy spoken today, but also in fulfillment of his prophecy spoken through Zechariah.

2. Ride On in Humility and Gentleness

Yet what else did we sing? “Ride on, ride on in majesty! Hark! All the tribes hosanna cry. O Savior *meek*, pursue your road, With palms and scattered garments strowed. Ride on, ride on in majesty! In *lowly* pomp ride on...” How does majesty go together with humility and meekness?

Yet as we look at Jesus, it is undeniable that he exhibits both traits at the same time. “They approached *Jerusalem* and came to Bethphage *on the Mount of Olives*.” Jesus was coming back to a place and a people that had rejected him many times, even before he took on human flesh. In Ezekiel 10 and 11, the LORD gives Ezekiel a vision of the LORD leaving the temple in Jerusalem as a result of the unfaithfulness of the people. The cloud of glory left its place above the Ark of the Covenant and moved to the east gate of the temple. Then it left the temple and the city and stopped above the Mount of Olives.

Now the glory returns, but how? Not in a thick and glorious cloud. In an ordinary looking man. Not in wrath, but in gentleness, on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

And where has Jesus gotten his mount? From Royal Rides, the finest stable in the holy city? No, from strangers in a little village.

Yes, his mount may be an unbroken colt, but it is still the colt of a donkey, not a snorting, majestic war steed. Imagine that you are a subject of a king who always rides around in pomp on a magnificent mount, and you have disobeyed him. Now you realize your sin. Do you want to return to him? But what if you had disobeyed a king who rode around unpretentiously on a young donkey, a beast of burden? You would not be as scared then.

Jesus rides on in gentleness and humility.

And why does he choose a donkey? Doubtless for its humble appearance. Doubtless for fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy. But why else?

What is the characteristic mark of a donkey? He has a line of dark hair running the length of his back, and another line of dark hair across his withers, forming the shape of a cross.

There is a legend that after the donkey had carried Jesus into Jerusalem, he followed Jesus to the cross on Good Friday. There he was so saddened to see Jesus dying that he had to turn around and look away. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to leave because he loved Jesus so much. As a reward, Jesus let the shadow of the cross fall on his back and remain there, and that is how the donkey came to carry the cross on its back.

Not only is that clearly a myth; it also takes away from the beauty of this Palm Sunday scene. It takes away from the beauty of what we see as we observe Jesus. Jesus knows how this

week will end. You would think that he would want to enjoy the events of today to their fullest, a bit of escape before the full reality of his mission sets in.

But no, he deliberately chooses a donkey, so that, even before Good Friday, as he rides into Jerusalem, he comes on a cross. He chooses the donkey as a reminder that he is not riding into Jerusalem for the praise, which will die away. He is not riding into Jerusalem for the royal treatment, which will subside. He is not riding into Jerusalem because of what the crowds can give to him, but because of what he can give to the crowds. He rides on to die.

This donkey rider will not flinch when the crowds cut much larger, much thicker branches for crucifying him and make him carry them. He will not flinch when they remove *his* clothes instead of *their own*. He will not flinch when they hurl insults instead of praises, when they shout, "Hail, king of the Jews," instead of, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The donkey reminds him today: The cross is why he has come.

Jesus rides on in gentleness and humility.

Friends, we appropriately sing the song of the Palm Sunday crowd when we are preparing to approach the Lord's altar for Communion: "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" It is appropriate, because there we receive Jesus in all of his majesty. We then return to our seats and pray, "We pray that through this Supper you will strengthen our faith in you and increase our love for one another." Or we pray, "We pray that you will not forsake us but will rule our hearts and minds by your Holy Spirit, so that we willingly serve you day after day."

But what do you find when you approach the Lord's altar next time? Is your faith always stronger than the last time? Is your love always increased? Have you always willingly served Jesus day after day between the last time and this time? And when you realize the answers to those questions, what do you do? Turn around and walk away? Flee the sanctuary? "Sorry, Pastor, I can't take the Lord's Supper this morning." No, you continue to the altar. Because even though your King comes to you in all his majesty, he comes with it cloaked in humility and gentleness, as if he were on a donkey's colt. He does not say, "Take and eat, this is my body," and then dive into your mouth in a consuming ball of fire. He comes to you in bread, in wine.

This is exactly the King we need, isn't it? A majestic, powerful King to ride into our hearts and win our love, praises, and obedience, for our sinful hearts are a hard road that needs to be softened. A humble king to forgive us when our love and obedience grow cold and our praises grow mute. A gentle king who is patient and whom we can return to for forgiveness again and again. A king who comes to us not in thick cloud, not on mighty steed, not in an armed motorcade, but with all his majesty cloaked in words, in water, in bread, in wine. A king who wanted to die for us, for you, for me. A king who does not promise us an easy road, just as he himself did not have an easy road, but who does promise us that while we carry the cross, we also carry him in our hearts through faith in him. His *heavy* cross and *bitter* death, which paid for all our sins, makes our cross *light* and our death *sweet*.

So here comes Jesus. He rides by in front of us, pauses, and turns and looks at us. He is curious what we have to say.

"Ride on, Jesus! Ride on in majesty and power ! Ride on in humility and gentleness! Ride on to die! Bow your meek head to mortal pain, Then take, O Christ, your power and reign." Amen.