

Matthew 21:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²telling 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. ³If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.”

⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. ⁸A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. ⁹The 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!

Hosanna in the highest!

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹And the crowds were saying, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

His Final Steps Led to a Donkey

I.

The lights are turned low—so low that it’s almost black in the stadium. The crowd is hushed with anticipation. A spotlight comes on, pointed to the banner covering the all-important tunnel. The crowd begins to cheer. Smoke machines billow. The mascot and cheerleaders form a line on either side beyond the banner. Lights flash from all around, but the spotlight stays trained on the banner.

The P.A. system crackles to life with intro music. As the players split through, the stadium announcer introduces each one with suitable embellishments and praise for all the player’s accomplishments. The roar of the crowd is thunderous, but with each introduction it seems to grow even louder.

There’s one player to go: the superstar. It seemed impossible moments before, but the roar is even louder as that one all-important player is introduced.

It’s the championship; the final game. This is the one that will decide it all, and there stands the team of champions. All the hopes and dreams of the crowd are pinned on them.

Think of the preparation that went into it all! The lights, the banner, the cheerleaders and mascot, the announcer prepared with just the right music to pipe through the stadium and just the right words with just the right stadium announcer voice to stir the crowd to a fevered pitch.

That’s the way special events are supposed to begin. I’m no superstar, but wouldn’t it be something to get some spotlights going and some smoke machines and have some kind of dramatic entrance? Not so much.

II.

Jesus didn’t follow conventional wisdom when he made his grand entrance into Jerusalem, but it was pretty impressive, none-the-less. Matthew says that when Jesus arrived: “The whole city was stirred up, asking, ‘Who is this?’” (Matthew 21:10, EHV). In those days the city of Jerusalem probably didn’t normally have a huge population, but at Passover time people came from everywhere to have their special Passover celebration in the holy city of Jerusalem. An ancient historian estimates that during Passover time there were probably about two million people in the city.

Word about Jesus, “The prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matthew 21:11, EHV), spread

quickly. I think sports franchises of today would be thrilled to have two million people clustered around the arena, even if they couldn't all be inside. It would be great to have a huge crowd watching the main event on big screens outside.

It wasn't just the two million people gathered in Jerusalem that day who noticed. Here we are nearly 2,000 years later, and Christians still celebrate what we call Palm Sunday. The name stuck from the massive crowds that "Were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road" (Matthew 21:8, EHV). They wanted to protect their champion from the dust and mud, or maybe from the squishy stuff left by thousands and thousands of sacrificial animals that had been herded into the city in anticipation of Passover. They didn't want anything to get on Jesus and spoil his robes.

The name Palm Sunday stuck, despite the fact that also: "A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road" (Matthew 21:8, EHV). Thousands of religious pilgrims were literally willing to provide the shirts off their backs for the Savior. Why? To show their love for him. To show respect and devotion to the One to whom they shouted their hosannas.

"As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²telling 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" (Matthew 21:1-2, EHV). What kind of king, planning his impressive entrance, would give these instructions to his disciples?

For the last week or so, Jesus and his disciples had been in Bethany at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Now it was time for Jesus to take his final steps to Jerusalem, to go up and over the Mount of Olives, pause for a moment to take in the panoramic view of Jerusalem and the temple, and weep over a city that would reject him (Luke 19:41).

That was still to come. First, two of Jesus' disciples had to make that important side-trip to Bethphage—a little village whose name means "House of unripe figs."

No one would ever even remember the name of that little town if it hadn't been the place Jesus sent his disciples to find the donkey and her colt. When they found them, they were to bring them to Jesus.

What would *you* think if some strangers marched onto your property, right up to your animals tied next to the door for your next trip to the village market, and untied them and began to lead them away? Of course, as God who was there at creation, all things really belonged to Jesus. That's why he told the two sent on their errand: "If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once" (Matthew 21:3, EHV). And that was all that was necessary for the earthly owners of these donkeys.

His final steps led to a donkey. Two donkeys, actually. Jesus knew it had to be this way to fulfill every promise about him: "This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matthew 21:4-5, EHV). Matthew actually mentions two prophecies in one fell swoop. Isaiah said: "Tell the daughter of Zion: 'Look, your salvation is coming'" (Isaiah 62:11, EHV). It was Zechariah who prophesied in today's First Reading: "Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! Look! Your King is coming to you. He is righteous and brings salvation. He is humble and is riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9, EHV).

A lowly donkey was needed on Palm Sunday as a sign to let the "Daughter of Zion," the Jewish people, know that Jesus was the Promised One bringing salvation—salvation not just for them, but for us all.

If Jesus had spoken with the PR department of any major sports franchise or any corporation, I doubt they would have recommended using a donkey to make an impressive entrance into Jerusalem. But any lost sinner, waiting for the King of David, would see that

donkey and remember God's Old Testament promises. They would be more than ready to throw down their outer clothing on the path ahead of him or cut down and spread palm branches on the road—all while shouting their hosannas.

III.

Jesus was a King of limitless power. He proved that by the prophecies he fulfilled. Whether they were made hundreds or thousands of years before, Jesus kept every last one. It was as if he were checking off his daily to-do list.

“They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it” (Matthew 21:7, EHV). That sounds so straight-forward. The other gospels record an important fact. As Jesus sent them out to acquire these animals, he told them: “You will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat” (Luke 19:30, EHV). Anyone who has been around horses or donkeys knows that you don't just climb on one that has never been ridden. There's a process. You have to prepare the animal for the idea of having a rider.

When the disciples brought the colt to Jesus, the animal knew it had met its Master and its Maker. There was no reason to be afraid.

The donkey instinctively knew what sinful humans like you and I learn ever so slowly: Jesus is indeed the kind of King who was promised. Humble and meek, caring and giving. He'll watch over us. There is no reason to be afraid. He did not come to *be* served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

When Jesus sat on that donkey, the crowd followed the script the Lord had written a thousand years earlier for Jesus' arrival. The air rang with a shout. The crowds kept repeating their chant at a decibel level rivaling the stadium of a championship playoff.

The words of their chant were borrowed from Psalm 118: “O LORD, please save us now. O LORD, grant us success. ²⁶Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD” (Psalm 118:25-26, EHV). When you hear “hosanna,” you might think, “that's just like hallelujah!” But hosanna isn't just a shout of praise. It's so much more. *Hosanna* is a Hebrew cry for “Help!” It means: “Save us now!”

That's a fitting cry for us today, too. Hosanna! Save us now! There are so many times we use a cry like that. It's the prayer when you hear the doctor use the dreaded word “cancer,” or when you struggle through the challenges of rehab after a stroke or heart attack. It's the cry we make on behalf of the elderly, or for a young couple struggling to pay the bills. We feel free to make these cries because we know our King is humble, compassionate, caring, selfless.

His final steps to a donkey show what kind of King Jesus really is. He's the kind of King who cares, listens, and answers every last one of our prayers. Whether it's the prayer of a little child begging the Lord to make her goldfish better, or the prayer of a husband holding his wife's hand as she takes her last breaths in the hospice bed, praying, “Please, Lord, take her home.”

Hosanna! Save us now! There's a far greater reason for us to cry out with the Palm Sunday crowds than illness or any difficulties we are experiencing right now in life. Jesus' final destiny was always to be the cross. That was always his goal. Saving us from the curse of sin was what he came to do. That's what he did when he bowed his head and died, when he dragged down into the grave the most deadly infection to ever plague our world: a pandemic with a 100% fatality rate—sin.

Jesus answers the cry “Hosanna” to show what kind of King he really is. He is precisely the kind of King broken people like you and I need—now and always. Amen.