

“Your King Is Coming to You”

Matthew 21:1-11

3/28/10—Palm/Passion Sunday

“Your king is coming to you.”

For centuries God’s people waited. In all the strangeness of this life, in all the times of silence when nothing seemed to be happening, through the voices of the prophets who spoke the Word of God, to encourage, to challenge, to chastise, the people waited. In exile, unable to worship God in the Holy Temple, back into Jerusalem, and in Roman occupation, the people waited.

[Desert image]

They waited for their king, for the One who would bring all things back into order, back into power, back into the respect and dignity God’s people were without for so long. They waited, for fulfillment of God’s promises of better days.

“Your king is coming to you.” Finally the day comes.

[Manger scene image]

God’s promise is fulfilled. The Messiah has arrived. But there is something a little peculiar about Him. Who is He? We know that He was born in a stable back behind some inn one night. Well, the prophets of God said that He would be humble. I guess that’s a pretty good start.

Yes, there is something peculiar. Just like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day who tried to pin Jesus down into some category, or try in some way to relate Jesus with something of our world, just the same we can find ourselves struggling with who Jesus is, that He is the Son of God yet rides on a donkey.

[Jesus on a donkey image]

We can try hard to relate Jesus with something of our world, but He never quite seems to fit any category or mold or something we can completely understand or control.

“What I was told in seminary was something like this: when you preach, you try to lesson the gap between your congregation and the Gospel. You start with the Bible over here, and then you reach out—through careful illustration, real-life stories, references to the daily newspaper—to those who are seated over there in the pews.

“The preacher is the person who closes the gap, that great divide between contemporary people and today’s Gospel.

“But this Sunday, with Jesus coming into Jerusalem and about to bring out the worst in us, I wonder. Perhaps my best role as a preacher is to widen the gap, to point out the vast difference between Jesus and us. We look at Jesus—God in the flesh—and find Him, well, peculiar.

“Tom Long, a distinguished teacher of preaching at Emory University, in the week after the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington a few years ago, was on a national radio talk show. He was told that he was among a group of three religious leaders who were going to be asked to talk about how their faith responded to September 11. They would have about a minute to respond via telephone.

“The show began and the host said, ‘Dr. Long, you are a pastor, what does the Christian faith have to say about those who did these terrible acts?’

“Tom said that he mumbled something like, ‘Well, our faith teaches us that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness, but that Jesus died to save sinners. In every situation,

the Christian faith teaches us to look for God's will, to see reconciliation and redemption. We can understand evil because our faith teaches us that we commit evil' ...something to that effect.

"The host turned to the next religious leader on the program, a man who was a representative of another great religion. That guest began by saying, 'Let me just say that I think that what the reverend said was the worst thing I ever heard. The people who did this were inhuman and evil. We need to find them and punish them without any of this redemption business. Nothing anybody did deserved this...'

"Tom said at that moment it struck him how very strange it is to be somebody trying to follow Jesus.

"This is not exactly what we expected of God, and not exactly what we expected God to expect of us. It's peculiar." (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 33, No. 1, Year A, Jan-March 2005)

"Your king is coming to you."

What kind of king is this?

Where is He going? The crowd around Him this day I am sure was sincere in their devotion and praise for Jesus. We have no reason to think otherwise. They surrounded Him. They were feeling that stir that Jesus was causing throughout the city. Exciting. And so they followed Him into the city.

But where is He going? To take the throne as king? To confront Caesar? To claim His and their rightful place in the world again as God's chosen people?

Not quite. Jesus is going to fulfill what God promised, but in a most peculiar way, something that would seem quite strange.

[Cross image—keep up and every couple minutes change to a new cross image]

As Jesus and the crowd enter Jerusalem, Jesus stays straight on course for the cross while the crowd gets swallowed up in the turmoil of the city. They were unprepared for what was to come. The procession into Jerusalem took a turn in a direction that no one but Jesus was willing to take. And truly, it was only Jesus' death that would satisfy. It was only Jesus who could reconcile us to God, "*Who*", as the Apostle Paul says, "*being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*"

Jesus is going to fulfill what God promised, but in a most peculiar way, something that would seem quite strange. Because how quickly we forget the full version of God's Word to His people.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Jesus Christ must suffer and be rejected. This 'must' is inherent in the promise of God - the Scriptures must be fulfilled. There is a distinction here between suffering and rejection. Had He only suffered, Jesus might still have been applauded as the Messiah. All the sympathy and admiration of the world might have been focused on His passion. It could have been viewed as a tragedy with its own intrinsic value, dignity and honor. But in the passion, Jesus is a rejected Messiah. His rejection robs the passion of its halo of glory. It must be a passion without honor." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller (Great Britain: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959), 76)

Your king is coming to you, and He is bringing redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation. Yes, and He is bringing that through His own death upon a cross. That is where He is going.

We must sing our praises to Jesus Christ, but we must also be prepared for the turmoil He brings to our lives. Jesus shakes things up. As Friday comes closer, as we walk with Jesus nearer to the cross, we begin to see more clearly the reality of who Jesus is. The cross comes into view on the horizon and our shouts of praise become quiet, replaced now with a different kind of stirring deep within us. The goose-bumps on your flesh no longer are from the thrill of seeing your Lord coming in His glory, but are now from the chill of knowing what will happen on that cross. You shake, shudder, because it is due to your and my sin that He will be nailed to it. That is too much to bear. The turmoil is too overwhelming. And so we are swallowed up into the rest of the city, only to blend in and watch Friday's terrible events unfold before us.

Your king is coming to you. Will you go to Him? Are you prepared to go with Him? In our Sunday praise are we prepared for Friday's price? Yes, many knew and proclaimed the truth, but so very few were left surrounding Jesus as He hung on the cross.

Because we know that the peculiarity of Jesus, the strangeness of this King, will cause Him to lose His luster with the crowd. Because we want action, not redemption. We want justice our way, not forgiveness. We want someone who is going to take a stand, be strong, show us the way to success, not fall at the hands of others, weak and dying on a cross, leaving us to fend for ourselves in this nasty world.

It's Palm Sunday, *"Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey."* *"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."* Wave your palms in honor of the One who came to save us.

Because we know that by the end of the week, His honor will be gone, sucked back into the crowd, turned sour and bitter. Wave your palms and give Him the honor, because the One who has all the power expressed it in a most unusual way, that is, upon a cross, dying, for you and me and the sin of all the world.

"Your king is coming to you."

Like the crowds that day around Jesus, we are here to give Jesus honor and praise this day. But where will you be Good Friday? Take this week, this Holy Week, join us Thursday for Love Feast, read and reflect upon the last days of Jesus' life. Don't be too quick to get to Easter Sunday.

This week we walk behind Jesus as He goes to the cross and stares evil in the face. Large matters will be worked out among us before the end of this week. The battle to be fought on Friday is huge, cosmic, eternal. Because on Jesus' cross our sins are nailed along with everyone else's. In order to have the relationship with Jesus Christ needed to follow Him and serve others, this week we must also examine our own lives, be brutally honest with ourselves, and nail our sins to the cross. Painful, yes, but oh so necessary.

As we lay down our palms before Jesus, we must not walk toward Easter empty handed. To get to the empty tomb we must first pick up a cross.

Live in this world with all its heartache and struggles, remembering what Jesus did to overcome it. That He came to you, He receives your praise, and He absorbs and heals your rejection of Him.

Because in this world that is so fickle and full of trouble, Jesus brings His strange,
yet wonderful love and grace.

“Your king is coming to you.” Amen.