

Unexpected!

It's Palm Sunday and we are taking a break from our series *The Story* today and next Sunday when we celebrate Easter. The truth is the events of this week are The Story! This is what it's all about, what everything else is pointing to: the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. In two weeks we will be back in Judges, but this morning, turn to Matthew 21 as we look at the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

We call this Palm Sunday because the gospel writers tell us people cut palm branches and placed them in the road before Jesus as he rode into the city. Some even laid their coats on the ground before him. This was an ancient way of paying homage to royalty and reflected their attitude toward Jesus at this time.

Palm Sunday marks not only Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem but the beginning of what we call Passion week or Holy week, the week leading to his crucifixion and to his death, burial and resurrection. This is a week like no other.

If I was reading the gospels and studying the life of Jesus for the first time, I think one of the comments I would be making frequently would be, "I didn't expect that. I didn't see that coming." Jesus said unexpected things and did unexpected things and from my perspective he is still doing unexpected things. That's what happens in the story of his triumphal entry. Turn to **Matthew 21** and let's read this passage and then let me show you a couple of unexpected things in the story.

Jesus had been teaching and working miracles for more than three years now. Coming to Jerusalem at this time, the week of the Passover, appears to be a risky decision. He had recently raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was a prominent citizen of Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem and word had quickly spread concerning this miracle. Jesus' popularity among the people was at an all time high and with the feast of Passover beginning this week, Jewish political and religious fervor was at a feverish pitch. Any time there was a Jewish feast it pointed out the stark contrast between the Jewish people and their Roman occupiers. Remember from our earlier sermon about the feast of Passover, it was the retelling of the story of God delivering the people from Egypt, from slavery and oppression. The people were ready for a new Moses to come and lead them. They were ready for a new Jewish deliverer and here comes Jesus, a miracle worker that feeds the hungry with bread and fish, heals the sick and even raises the dead. "What more of a sign do we need? This is our Messiah!"

The people were looking for a political leader and they were ready to make him king but Jesus would turn down the offer. He would turn down their offer of power, control, a royal office and throne. The truth is he had turned all of that down before, in the desert when Satan offered him all the nations of the world if he would only bow down and worship him instead of worshipping God. Jesus had refused then and he refuses now. He didn't come to establish an earthly kingdom, he came to save us from our sins! No doubt the gospel of Jesus Christ has brought about unexpected and dramatic changes to every society and culture, every people, every nation it has touched, but that is a by product of salvation, the fruit of lives forever changed by his saving grace.

Jesus knew the political interest of the people. They wanted to make him king. He also knew the plans of the religious leaders. They wanted to kill him. Interestingly, the bible tells us they also wanted to kill Lazarus because he was a living testimony to the miracle working power of Jesus. Lazarus was a living, walking, endorsement of what the people were saying about Jesus being a prophet sent from God. The leaders wanted Jesus dead, but they wanted to do it after the Passover because of Jesus' popularity among the people that were crowding into Jerusalem for the feast.

His arrival in Jerusalem for Passover may have been unexpected by some, but it was no accident. Jesus knew he was the true Passover lamb that was meant to die to take away the sins of the world. By making his entrance into the city in such a dramatic and public fashion, he knew it would force the hand of the chief priests and leaders to act. Timing was everything in the unfolding of God's redemption plan.

In addition to these behind the scene factors, Jesus' entrance on a donkey's colt had a prophetic significance as well. Matthew quotes from the prophet Zechariah, **“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.”**
Zechariah 9:9.

The cry of the people, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord” is from Psalm 118:26, a psalm that would be sung at the Passover meal that anticipated the arrival of the Messiah. The people were crying “Hosanna” which means, “Save now.” By their words and actions the people were declaring Jesus as Messiah and he was fulfilling the prophetic word concerning the Messiah's coming. Jesus knew all of this as he sat upon the colt and began the

descent down the Mount of Olives and into the city of Jerusalem. In spite of all that, it still strikes me that **Jesus comes in unexpected ways**. This Palm Sunday arrival is the only record we have of Jesus riding. He always walked. (He even walked on water!) It was unexpected, but it was, however according to the Scripture.

Picture this entrance, with palm branches and the outer coats of people laying on the road. The citizens of Jerusalem would have been accustomed to people of importance arriving with fanfare, runners announcing the arrival of Roman officials. Instead, this king comes riding on a colt of a donkey. He is not surrounded by soldiers and servants but Matthew's account tells us he was surrounded by common people, by children who were shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David". It was the common people, the poor, the downtrodden, the hurting. There were no signs of worldly power or authority here. It was just Jesus and the people. It's the style of Jesus isn't it? The one who came as a suffering servant, as the least and the last, the one who came to give himself as a ransom for all of us.

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised by an unexpected entrance on Palm Sunday when we consider his initial entrance. Remember he came to us in the most unexpected and unlikely way of all, as a wrinkled, blood covered, screaming-crying infant. A new born, helpless and vulnerable. He wasn't born surrounded by the trappings of royalty or power or authority. Instead he was born in a stable surrounded by the animals and all the signs, sounds and smells of a stable. His attendants were not soldiers or guards but nearby shepherds who came to see the newborn king.

Since he came into the world in such unexpected fashion, we shouldn't be surprised that he came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in unexpected fashion. And if we shouldn't be surprised at his entrance into Jerusalem this Sunday, then we really shouldn't be surprised that next Sunday he will make an even more dramatic and unexpected entrance as he steps out of the tomb, free of those graveclothes and freed from the icy fingers of death as he proves that he is indeed the resurrection and the life. Don't be surprised when he suddenly and unexpectedly appears in a locked room as he did with his disciples, inviting them to see and to believe. And don't be surprised when he comes to you in an unexpected fashion. Perhaps he'll come to you walking on the water, walking upon the waves in the midst of the fiercest storm in your life. Don't be surprised if he says in the midst of that storm, "Don't be afraid. I'm here. It's going to be ok" and then he speaks the word and the storm turns to peace and calm. Don't be surprised

when he comes in unexpected ways to meet you, to deliver you, to bring you help and hope. Jesus is still coming to us in unexpected ways! Then look at this:

Jesus loves unexpected people. The crowd had gathered. This was not just the 12 disciples or the 70 or the 120. These weren't the faithful followers from the Galilee. These were people from all walks of life, young and old, rich and poor, the devout as well as the doubters, the curious and the true worshippers. They had all come to see Jesus.

My guess is they didn't all have the right credentials or pedigree. They didn't have the right education or family background. They weren't all dressed appropriately. They weren't all lovely or even lovable. They weren't all religious. They weren't all looking the best or smelling the best. Maybe they weren't even all Jews. Some just flat out didn't belong, at least by the standards of some of the rest of the crowd. That's why Luke's account tells us the Pharisees told Jesus to rebuke his disciples. Some of those folks just weren't acting in appropriate ways. "Someone needs to tell those ragged looking children to stop calling him the Son of David." I imagine some were thinking, "I wouldn't have expected to see someone like you here."

Why would I even think this? Because Jesus often surprised some in the crowd by his association with others in the crowd. Luke 7:36 tells of a sinful woman anointing Jesus feet and his host, a Pharisee thinking to himself, "If Jesus were really a prophet he would know what kind of woman this is..." She was probably thinking "If Jesus knew what kind of a hypocritical jerk this guy is he wouldn't be eating with him." She was surprised Jesus would eat with a Pharisee and he was surprised that Jesus would allow her to anoint his feet. That's because Jesus loves unexpectedly!

Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drinker because of the folks with whom he associated, because of the folks he loved. Jesus knew and loved lepers and prostitutes, the wealthy and the poor, beggars and priests. He knew prominent people like Lazarus and his sisters, and he knew publicans and sinners. He loved unexpected people. The people we might find unlovable, or we could only love them after we changed them – Jesus just loved them. 1 John 4 says, "He first loved us." He loved us before we loved him. He loved us before he changed us. He loved us while we were unlovable to others. Jesus loves unexpected people.

Luke's account says Jesus stopped to look out over the city of Jerusalem, (it's quite a view from the Mount of Olives) and he began to weep (Luke 19:41). Remember his earlier prayer over Jerusalem, his city and his people. **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the**

prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Luke 13:34-35.

They stoned the prophets and killed and rejected those God sent to them. And Jesus knew they were about to kill him as well, the only Son of God, but he loved them anyway. He loved them unexpectedly. Unexplainably. They were fickle, rebellious, but he loved them. John said, **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” 1 John 4:10.** Jesus loved those in that crowd, even though before the week was out, some of those same people would perhaps be crying for his crucifixion and requesting the release of Barabbas.

He loved these unexpected people. We shouldn’t be surprised then that he loves us – that while we were sinners, enemies of God, that even then, especially then, he loved us and died for us that we could be saved. Look at us! Sinners. Rebellious. Hypocrites. Unfaithful. Liars. Thieves. Adulterers. Murderers. Covenant breakers. Guilty of sexual immorality of all kinds. But he loves us and will change us and make us new creations in Christ if we will only come to him and repent and ask his forgiveness. He will show mercy and pardon to all who come to him in repentance and faith.

Don’t be surprised when he still loves you even though you have failed him and sinned against him again. He still loves unexpected people, just like us. He is still loving us and showing us that love in the unexpected ways of grace. Finally,

Jesus does unexpected things. He does things like riding the donkey’s colt and weeping over Jerusalem. Then if that isn’t unexpected enough, in verse 12 he enters the temple area and apparently for the second time in his ministry begins to run out the money changers in the temple. These people were defrauding people, taking advantage of them by exchanging money at a profit and selling animals for sacrifice at unreasonable and exorbitant prices.

I love the fact that Jesus confronts the religious leaders. We religious folks are so quick to point the finger at “the world”. We choose up sides and start preaching about “us” vs. “them”. The truth is, “us” are living pretty much like “them.” Jesus spoke the truth and confronted sin, calling people to honesty and integrity and righteousness.

You would think too that knowing how precarious the balance of power was, Jesus

wouldn't want to do anything that might "rock the boat" or cause trouble. Confronting the religious establishment would hardly be the way to keep a low profile and avoid trouble in the last week of your life. But Jesus does unexpected things. Whether it is riding on a donkey's colt, casting out money changers and cleansing the temple, or forgiving and loving us, he does some unexpected things. Consequently, it shouldn't surprise us that at the height of his popularity he is arrested, falsely accused, tried in a mockery of a trial, found guilty of blasphemy, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. We shouldn't be surprised that while dying on the cross he forgave his executioners and those who falsely accused him as well as extending forgiveness to one of the thieves dying next to him and graciously assures him of eternal life. Jesus does unexpected things.

And since he does unexpected things, we shouldn't be surprised that 3 days later he rose from the dead and stepped out of the tomb alive and well, conquering death and hell and the grave, having made the once and for all sacrifice that atoned for our sins.

And since he has done unexpected things, then you shouldn't be surprised when I tell you he has planned some other unexpected things ahead. If you've not yet made Jesus the Savior and Lord of your life, don't be surprised some morning to wake up and find millions of people have disappeared mysteriously and unexpectedly from this earth. Don't be surprised someday when the graves of God's people burst upon as the spirit unites with the body and in the twinkling of an eye death gets swallowed up in victory and the grave loses its hold. Don't be surprised when the people of God who are alive and remain are caught up together to meet the Lord in the air and we will all be together with him and one another forever.

Don't be surprised when he does the unexpected. Not just on Palm Sunday or Easter Sunday or on the day of resurrection and the rapture of the church – don't be surprised when he does the unexpected today, in your life! Don't be surprised when he saves and delivers and heals. Don't be surprised when he steps in and gives new hope to the broken and hurting. Do you know Jesus? Well then nothing should surprise you!

Where Jesus is the unexpected happens. Maybe unexpected things have happened to you. You never thought you would be in the mess you are in, but if you know Jesus, don't give up. Spread the palm branches, prepare the way for his entrance and expect the unexpected. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." Blessed is the one who still does unexpected things. Welcome him with praise and get ready for the unexpected to happen in your life.