

Palm Sunday 2017

A Parade of Grace!

We were gone on vacation last week. Returning Thursday evening we arrived at the airport in West Palm Beach just in time to see Air Force One landing. We hurried from one side of the terminal to the other watching the jet as it reached its final destination. I counted more than twenty five vehicles that pulled away in the motorcade; black SUV's, an ambulance, fire trucks, local law-enforcement vehicles. It was an interesting sight, and particularly since I was already thinking about another uncommon arrival of someone even more important. We call it the triumphal entry. Jesus riding on a donkey with people laying palm branches or laying their coats on the road before him. It was nothing like the triumphal entry of the Roman generals and emperors, riding in a chariot pulled by white horses, decorated with all the symbols of wealth and military power. The conquering general would display the captives and plunder of his victory to the delight of the crowds that lined the streets.

Jesus' entrance was extraordinary by contrast to the Presidential motorcade and to the first century Roman triumphal entry. No trappings of power, no signs of military might, no weapons, no conquered slaves behind him. Just a group of followers, disciples who had been with him for the past three years and the welcoming crowds of ordinary folks. No dignitaries present. Jesus had come to Jerusalem several times before but had never entered the city like this. Of all the traveling Jesus did, we have no record of him ever riding. All we heard of him doing was walking or taking a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee and he didn't even use the boat every time to cross the Sea. Why this entrance on a donkey? Why like this? Why now?

John's gospel says, **"The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel." John 12:12-13** Luke's account tells us, **"As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road." Luke 19:36** The palm branches and spreading their cloaks and the shouts were all consistent with honoring royalty or conquering kings that entered the city in the ancient world. The bible says when Jehu was anointed King of Israel, **"They hurried and took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, "Jehu is king!" 2 Kings 9:13.** Spreading cloaks and palm branches was consistent with heralding the coming of a king!

The feast John mentions is the feast of Passover, a week long commemoration of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It included the Passover sacrifice and a meal with the retelling to the children of this miraculous story of deliverance. The city was packed with tens of thousands of additional people as Jews from everywhere returned to Jerusalem for Passover. Some believe families were camping on the Mount of Olives and along the road that led down into the Kidron Valley. Adults and children were everywhere as Jesus came riding into the city. Many had come from the Galilee where Jesus had ministered. They knew who he was and the miracles he had done. Others had heard about his raising Lazarus from the dead and John 12:17 tells us that crowd had been spreading the word about Jesus and this wonderful miracle he had performed in raising Lazarus from the dead. But still, why did he come riding on a donkey's colt? Why did he choose to enter on this day in this way? Why a parade?

Riding into the city fulfilled prophecy. Both Matthew 21 and John 12 refer to Jesus' entrance riding on a colt of a donkey as being a fulfillment of prophecy concerning the Messiah. **“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 prophet Zechariah was writing 550 years before Jesus, and yet the prophecy came true. That wasn't all the prophet had to say about the Messiah. He predicted he would be both a priest and a king (Zechariah 6:13), he would enter Jerusalem on a donkey colt (9:9), he would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (11:12), his hands, feet and side would be pierced (12:10); he would be Israel's shepherd and when he was struck down the sheep would be scattered (13:7). Zechariah also predicted the Messiah would someday return in glory to the Mount of Olives and at that time his enemies would be defeated and he would reign in splendor and peace over the whole earth (14:2-11). His earlier prophecies were accurate which suggests his prophecies about Jesus second coming will be accurate as well.

There are 333 prophecies in the Old Testament that deal with the promised Messiah with 456 details of his life predicted. Dr. D. James Kennedy's wrote in his book *Why I Believe*, “One of the purposes for God's giving the Old Testament to the Jewish people was to be able to identify the Messiah when He came from among them. Prophecies are usually vague by nature; not the ones in the Word of God.” Why did Jesus enter Jerusalem riding on a colt? Because the Bible prophesied he would and even to the minute detail, God's word is fulfilled.

Riding into the city was Jesus' announcement that He was the Messiah. Modern critics say that Jesus didn't really believe he was the Messiah or the Son of God, that this was thrust on him by the people. This event didn't happen by accident. The disciples didn't force this on him, nor did the crowds. The other gospel writers tell us Jesus arranged this parade, this entrance. He sent disciples ahead to get the donkey so he could ride it, not just fulfilling the Scripture from Zechariah but testifying to the people and to the Jewish authorities that he was the Messiah. Remember all the times Jesus healed someone and told them, "Don't tell anyone." Now, by riding into the city on a donkey, in fulfillment of this Messianic prophecy, Jesus was publicly saying, "If you've been wondering, Yes, I am the Messiah!" Jesus accepted the honor and the praise being shown to him that day. In Luke's account the Pharisees told Jesus he should rebuke his followers who were saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." (Luke 19:38) and Jesus said, "if they keep quiet the stones will cry out." Jesus accepted the honor and praise expressed by the people. This parade, this triumphal entry let everyone know Jesus was the Messiah!

Jesus' dramatic entrance forced his enemies to act. This not so subtle entrance of Jesus, coupled with the fact Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead just a short time before, had everyone talking. There was a new buzz among the crowds gathering in Jerusalem about Jesus. The leaders of the Jews had already met and decided Jesus had to die. They were afraid something like this would happen... the people would try to make Jesus their king and that would lead to a military response from the Romans. It would be bad for the city, the people, and it wouldn't help the members of the Sanhedrin either. They would lose their places of authority and power if they upset the Roman rulers. Remember Caiphas the high priest had said better that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation should perish. They thought, "remove Jesus and we remove the problem and the threat."

At the same time, Matthew's gospel tells us they were afraid to act during the Feast of the Passover because they didn't want to upset the crowds. They were afraid of a riot, but when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt and when they saw the size of the crowd and heard the people crying "Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the king of Israel." They thought, we don't have a choice. Notice verse 19, **"So the Pharisees said to one another, 'See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!'" John 12:19**

When they saw the response of the crowd to Jesus – when they saw him riding into town on the donkey’s colt in fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy about the Messiah - when they saw the people spreading palm branches and laying their coats on the ground before Jesus and crying out “Hosanna - Save us now!” they knew they had to act, regardless of the risk. The whole world has gone after him! They felt they had no choice but to stop Jesus by arresting him and having him executed. Why this grand entrance into Jerusalem? He knew it would bring this kind of response from the leaders and would lead to his arrest and crucifixion and that is another reason he rode into town. The bottom line is...

Jesus entered Jerusalem in order to die. It all came to a head. The Passover, the crowds in Jerusalem, Lazarus’ raised from the dead, the Sanhedrin’s concerns, Pilate and Herod in Jerusalem at the same time. It was a perfect storm – all of it according to God’s timing and plan. And Jesus knew what he was riding into, but this was why he came into the world. Jesus came to die for our sins and the sins of the whole world. This is why he enters Jerusalem, to allow God’s saving purpose to be fulfilled through his death and resurrection.

Mark’s gospel tells us plainly, **They were on their way up to Jerusalem with Jesus leading the way... “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.” Mark 10:32-34**

He entered in order to die for our sins. But why did it have to be that week? Why enter on this day? Instruction is given in the book of Exodus (12:1-6) concerning the Passover. The Israelites were told to choose a lamb on the tenth day of the month of Nisan and keep it with them until the fourteenth day of the month when everyone would kill the lamb as a sacrifice. This was the week of the feast of Passover in the month of Nisan. It was time. The fullness of time.

In Jerusalem during Passover, tens of thousands of lambs would be offered as a sacrifice, the innocent lamb dying for the guilty. But this year, another lamb would be offered as the sacrifice for sin, not just for the sin of one person or one family, not just for the sins of the people of Israel, but offered as a sacrifice for my sins and your sins, the sins of the whole world.

It was John the Baptist who pointed at Jesus and declared, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29.** Jesus was the lamb of God, the sacrifice for

our sins, and as he was entering the city of Jerusalem, at the same time, some believe that thousands of lambs were being brought into the city in preparation for the Passover sacrifice. Imagine, Jesus entering the city surrounded by lambs, realizing he was the lamb of God that would be slain once and for all to save us from our sins. What the blood of a sacrificial lamb could not do, the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, would do for us, once and for all.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on this day, like this, because he was the Lamb of God that was to be slain for our sins. He looked at Jerusalem as he entered and wept over the city. Perhaps he looked ahead through the centuries and saw us as well and wept over our sinfulness, our brokenness. Oh what a Savior, to suffer the agony and pain of the cross for us!

We know what happened at the end of this week. Arrested in the garden, tried before the Sanhedrin, handed over to Pilate and the Romans he is crucified, executed and buried. Three days later he rose from the dead, triumphing over sin, over death and hell and the grave. He rose triumphant, the sacrifice that provided forgiveness for us and for our sins, to all who repent and believe in Him. Now, through Christ, there is another parade, another triumphal procession and we get to march in that one. The apostle Paul writes, **“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” 2 Corinthians 2:14** We are part of this triumphal procession, a parade that testifies every moment of every day to the saving grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. We are trophies of his grace. We are testimonies to his great love and mercy. Our sins are forgiven. We are new creations in Christ. We are living in freedom, in victory over sin and temptation as we follow in that triumphal procession in Christ.

The Roman emperor or general would show off the spoils of his victory in their triumphal procession, showing off prisoners he had captured in chains. Jesus shows off the spoils of his victory and instead of showing off prisoners in chains, he shows off the people liberated from the chains of sin. We are the spoils of his victory, walking in a triumphant procession in Christ, no longer bound to sin and shame and death but walking in a new life. Thanks be to God who leads us in this parade of victory! We don't have to walk in the devil's parade any longer, shackled, prisoners to addiction and sin and sorrow and death. There is another king, a king who died on the cross to redeem you and deliver you from sin. He has come to forgive your sins, to set you free, to offer you a new life. There is another parade to walk in. The choice is yours. Come join the parade of grace, the procession of triumph in Christ!

