

## **Sunday, April 9, 2017 - PALM SUNDAY**

**Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer**

**Sermon Title: "Your king is coming to you...humble"**

**Scripture Readings: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 and Matthew 21:1-11**

Note: With next Sunday, holy week begins as it always does with Jesus' "triumphal" entry into Jerusalem. We will use Matthew's account of the parade, though the story can be found in each of the first three gospels. Only John's gospel does not mention the parade.

1. As anyone knows, who has made the pilgrimage to Israel, the Mount of Olives is the preferred way to approach Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives is slightly higher than the mount on which the temple was built and therefore provides the beautiful, postcard view of the city we all know from the news, featuring most prominently the Dome of the Rock (which obviously was not visible when Jesus lived). In Luke's gospel (chapter 19) we read that Jesus looked out over the city and wept at the sight of it. Take a few minutes to reflect on what Palm Sunday has meant (and now means) for you. I remember Palm Sunday in my childhood as a day of celebration, but surely that is wrong. It is the day that holy week begins and therefore the beginning of the final week of Jesus' life. Some people prefer to call this Sunday "Passion Sunday." In some ways, that's more accurate. What do you think?
2. The first part of the story is a bit mysterious. (Read Mark for a slightly longer account.) The most likely explanation is that relevant circumstances were well known to those who heard the oral tradition. When the story became fixed in written form, those circumstances were not included because they were not necessary (for them). First, there is the matter of how many animals are involved. Matthew suggests that there are two – "an ass tied, with a colt." Then, there is the matter of the question – "if anyone asks what you are doing, then say...." It's hard to imagine that someone would give up not one, but two animals without more of an explanation, so there seems to be more to this story that perhaps has been lost. Whatever happened, Jesus was very deliberate about this entry into the city, and he was specific about what he wanted. He knew what he wanted to do.
3. Matthew, who seems to be writing to a Jewish Christian audience, takes pains throughout his gospel to root the story in Old Testament prophecy. Here he cites not one, but two Old Testament texts – Zechariah 9:9 and Isaiah 42:11. If you read Zechariah carefully, you'll see that he writes about the entry of a triumphant and victorious king, with apocalyptic trumpets of joy, etc. (By the way, most scholars believe that Jesus rode only one animal! But Zechariah clearly seems to state that the king will ride "on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." And therefore, the story about procuring two animals refers to two animals. But for the actual riding, only one animal makes sense!)
4. Vs. 8 – "Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road." You may want to look briefly at 2 Kings 9:13 for an historical precedent involving King Jehu. There are other accounts – at least two in the apocryphal books of the Maccabees – of branches being strewn on the road as well.
5. Vs. 9 – Hosanna is a Hebrew word (see Psalm 118:26), and it means "save" or "help." But here it surely is a formal greeting, not a plea or prayer for saving. Or is it?
6. Vs. 9 – "Son of David" – only Matthew uses this honorific title, but again he is writing to a Jewish Christian audience, who would have welcomed this explicit identification with King David.
7. Vs. 10 – "all the city was stirred" – remember Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi (2:3) where he writes that "when Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." You may want to reflect briefly on what happens to a city when something momentous happens. Whether good or bad (a terrorist act, maybe, or a World Cup victory), entire cities can be caught up in a mood. And that was apparently the case here. And if everyone was caught up in this, it seems likely that the Roman governor would have heard about it sooner rather than later. His main job, it seems, was to preserve the

peace ... in the city of peace.

8. Speaking of the Roman governor, I can't help but mention another parade that must have occurred about the same time. Pilate spent most of the year at his home in Caesarea Philippi, on the Mediterranean coast. It is a lovely spot, and if your tour bus stopped at this site, then more than likely you have stood in his living room (or what is left of it). The sunsets must have been magnificent! But at least once each year Pilate (and his wife!) made the trip to Jerusalem. They would have come at Passover because the city would be crowded, and a crowded city where Rome was despised would be ripe for discontent and perhaps revolution. Pilate commanded many Roman soldiers, and he would have taken many of them with him for this visit. His own entry into the city, therefore, would have been quite a contrast to that of Jesus and his disciples. And that is precisely what we are supposed to see. Pilate represented one kind of victory and majesty, and Jesus represented another kind altogether. Our world is still inexplicably drawn to the first kind, but what we are encouraged to embrace is the other – the king who comes in humility. And yes, many victories can be won in lowliness and humility.