

Palm Sunday: A Day of Significant Insignificance

Matt. 21:1-17

Intro. I sense you're scratching your heads about the title of my message this AM, so let me explain. Our study of Matthew's Gospel brings us to **chap. 21** and the day commonly known as Palm Sunday. On this day Jesus made public His claim to be the Messiah and King of Israel. Unlike other monarchs who come with great pomp and extravagance, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey wearing the garb of a working man. His entourage was poor people from Galilee and the West Bank. His trumpets were the crowd's voices and His red carpet was their cloaks spread on the road. He didn't come to conquer by force, but to serve by love, grace, mercy, and the sacrifice of His own life. His presentation seemed entirely insignificant because it lacked everything that is so highly valued by the world. But on this day, ancient prophecies were fulfilled and God offered the world the one man who can make things right...the God-man, Jesus Christ. Tell me, what could be more significant than that? The event which seems insignificant to many was a day of momentous significance to God and to those who believe His Word.

Matt. 21 begins the fourth major section in Matthew's Gospel. The remaining eight chapters focus on one week in the life of Christ...the week commonly known as the Passion Week...a week that began with the triumphal entry and ended with the Resurrection. Each of the 4 Gospels includes extensive accounts because everything Jesus said and did was in preparation for His death, burial and resurrection. From towns in the north, Jesus has been steadily making His way to Jerusalem. On three occasions He told His disciples about the rejection and suffering that awaited Him there. But Jesus had come for this. His rejection and His crucifixion happened according to God's plan. Peter boldly declared this on the day of Pentecost. **Acts 2:23 - This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.** So those who say the cross was an unfortunate mistake are themselves mistaken. **Rev.13:8** declares Jesus to be the Lamb of God slain from before creation. This means the cross was no mistake but part of God's eternal plan.

So as we come to this Palm Sunday event Christ's ministry wasn't unraveling and circumstances spiraling out of control. Instead heaven's king was officially presented. We see Jesus exercising divine authority and receiving praise. But as we have throughout Matthew's Gospel, we again sense the unbelief and hostility that led to His rejection. Since Matthew was written to prove that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and King, everything he wrote shows Jesus to be the One who has the credentials and fulfilled their ancient prophecies.

Now I have to admit, preaching the Triumphal Entry in October is sort of like corn on the cob in December. We're in the wrong season. But maybe this out-of-season excursion allows us to actually study the text more than sermonize as so often is done on Palm Sunday. My outline this morning is embarrassingly simple. In **vs.1-17**, I've simply identified the key item or person in each section. The first item has to be the donkey with her colt mentioned 3x's in **vs. 1-7**.

1. A colt that fulfilled prophecy – vs. 1-7 - As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.

We need to remind ourselves that we're talking here about Israel's long-awaited Messiah whose arrival was planned from before creation. We're talking about the One who created and sustains the entire Universe by His spoken word...the King of kings and Lord of Lords. We're also talking about a unique day that has no equal in history...the day when the very Son of God offered Himself to Israel and the world. Though surrounded by crowds, no one fully grasped the enormous significance of this day...but Jesus did and taught by the Spirit and the Word, we do. **Lk. 19:41, 42** say, **As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes.**

So given the significance of this day, isn't it curious the chapter opens with so much to do about donkeys? If you remember the OT story, the Lord actually spoke to His prophet through a donkey. That's what the Lord was doing here. He was talking to us through a donkey. Let's take a moment to remember Balaam's story. In **Num. 22:30** Balaam's donkey explained why 3x's he refused to go forward. **"The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"** And you thought Mr. Ed was the first talking member of the horse family! Now let's be clear...in **Matt. 21**, neither the donkey or her colt actually speak. But the fact is...God was speaking to the world through these animals. You see, about 600 years before Jesus came, God had spoken through His prophet Zechariah. He told His people exactly how their Messiah and King would arrive. **Zech. 9:9 - 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.** So the story of the donkey and her colt were an essential part of God's plan. The Lord said Israel's king would come riding on **a colt, the foal of a donkey** and that's exactly how Jesus came. He didn't come on a war horse, but riding an animal that symbolized His own demeanor of gentleness and peace. If Bible prophecy teaches us anything it's this..."God always means what He says and says what He means." His plans are not contingent or changeable. Through Isaiah the Lord said, **"Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."** - **Isa. 14:24** So Israel's Messiah rode into Jerusalem exactly as God said He would.

Now Israel's leaders must have been aware of this prophecy, but they didn't seem to believe or pay attention to it. No one seemed to connect the dots except for one man...the donkey's owner. In **v.3** Jesus said to His disciples - **If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.** As Spurgeon suggests, this donkey owner may have been a disciple and student of prophecy. From the book of Daniel, he may have known the time was right for Messiah's appearance. He may have witnessed or heard stories about the miracles Jesus performed and the unique authority of His teachings. In those days, not everyone could afford a donkey but this man had two of them. Now no one hands over the keys to their vehicles to just anybody...am I right? But these Galilean disciples said the magic word. They said, **the Lord**...that is Jehovah...needs them. So it would seem this man connected the dots and understood how privileged he was to play a part in God's redemption program. But here's a question...what has God given to you that could be loaned to the Lord to further His kingdom?

So if God was speaking through a donkey, what did he say? Well first, God was pointing out the omniscience and sovereignty of Jesus. In **v. 2** Jesus said, **"Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her.** Notice the village was **ahead** of them not behind them. The disciples couldn't know there was a donkey and her colt tied up there, but Jesus did. The disciples must have wondered why the owner would let them have the donkeys but Jesus knew this man would do what they asked him to do. You see, through this donkey transaction, the Lord speaks to us about the unique Messianic qualifications of Jesus. Jesus is not limited like other kings. His knowledge is complete and His authority is absolute. The circumstances here seem insignificant or even coincidental to many, but to those who believe they have great significance.

In **vs. 4, 5** God speaks through the donkey again. When Matthew wrote this Gospel the Holy Spirit had opened His eyes to see prophecy fulfilled. He wrote, **This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"** Here Matthew quotes parts of **Isa. 62:11** and **Zech. 9:9**. And this is interesting...though these words were spoken by two different prophets on two different occasions, Matthew wrote, **This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet**: (singular) Since God's Spirit inspired each of His prophets to speak, the message given to one harmonized perfectly with the message given to the others!

But God says something else of significance through the donkey. **vs. 6, 7** say, **The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.** Here the donkey ride demonstrated that Jesus is in complete control of all things. Not only did Jesus fulfill prophecy and demonstrate His omniscience and authority by knowing where these animals were tied up, but Mark and Luke include a fascinating detail. **Mk. 11:2** and **Lk.19:30** say the colt had **never been ridden**. Nobody climbs on the back of a never ridden before colt for a peaceful ride...even with its mother walking alongside. Riding an unbroken donkey old enough to carry a man is a rodeo event, not a royal entry! But let's not forget who Jesus is. Speaking of the man God created before the fall and the entrance of sin, **Psa. 8:6-8** says, **You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.** Jesus demonstrated His control over nature the night He calmed the stormy sea. Remember?...The disciples were amazed. They said, **"Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" - Mk. 4:41.** The colt submitted and behaved perfectly because the rider on its back was Creator and Lord. By the taming of this colt God again declares who Jesus is. He's telling us that Jesus has the power and authority necessary to bring all creation under His control. And that's what Jesus will do that when He returns in power and glory. So listen to God as He speaks through a donkey. The details of that day are insignificant to many but they mean a great deal to those who know our Sovereign Lord. **vs. 8-11** emphasize **the crowds** and their plea for deliverance.

2. A Crowd that pleaded for deliverance – vs. 8-11 - A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Notice the **large crowd** is mentioned 3x's in **vs. 8, 9** and **11**. Then, as the scene unfolded, **v.10** says **the whole city was stirred**. This was an interesting crowd. They followed Jesus from points north and their number grew along the way. They were pilgrims headed to Jerusalem for Passover where they would join as many as 2 million who had come for this annual festival. As often done for an ancient dignitary, the crowd spread their cloaks on the road like a carpet. This symbolized their submission to the authority of Jesus as if to say, *"I place myself beneath you and you can walk on me if you want to."* They also waved palm branches, which was done as a sign of victory.

But notice what members of this excited crowd shouted as they made their way into Jerusalem. They shouted, **Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"** **Hosanna** is a plea which means *save now*. The very words the crowd shouted were anticipated 1,000 years earlier in **Psa.118:25, 26**. There was a sense of desperation in this cry. Under Roman rule, conditions were terrible for the average person. Millions were begging poor while Romans lived in the lap of luxury and excess. Unfortunately, the salvation this crowd clamored for was political and economic. They wanted a champion who would throw off Roman oppression. This shouldn't be hard for any to understand in today's world.

People today are no different. We are more interested in solutions for our economic woes than salvation for our souls. We value promises of liberty / affluence / and security more than the promise of life everlasting. The here and now holds far more interest than the sweet by and by.

So the crowd seemed to sense that if Jesus wasn't the promised Messiah, He was at least a possible candidate. But this much is certain...the multitudes didn't grasp the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom. They hadn't responded to Christ's call to repent / believe / and be saved. They hadn't embraced the fact that Christ's kingdom is righteous and God requires righteousness for anyone to enter it. So this event we call the Triumphal Entry was more like a political rally with a crowd that hoped they were following a winner. I take issue with those who label the event with titles like the "Untriumphal Entry" or the "Catastrophic Coronation." I reject these titles because all that God planned happened right on cue. Though marginalized because of its insignificance, the sovereignty of God triumphed and it can never be otherwise. Jesus Christ was as much in control this day as He is everyday!

And notice, when the crowd entered Jerusalem the thought on everyone's mind was put into words. They said, "**Who is this?**" Moments earlier this same crowd praised Jesus as **the Son of David...** a title that clearly identified Him as the Messiah. But now the crowd says, "**This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.**" Once inside the city in an environment that teemed with religious leaders, they changed their tune. Instead of one who **comes in the name of the Lord**, they identified Jesus as a **prophet**, that's all. In that day, prophets weren't extraordinary. A fair number of them wandered the landscape. And not to worry, this one hails from Nazareth in Galilee. Everybody knows the Messiah will come from Judea, not Galilee...and Bethlehem, not Nazareth. Nazareth was about as notable as Parsippany, NY! The pleas and the praises they shouted moments earlier were silenced by fear of the establishment. They fell in line with majority opinion. Besides that, during Caesar's watch, it was dangerous to be heard promoting the idea of a rival king. This crowd was just a short step from the terrible denial that came five days later. **Jn. 19:15** has the Jews shouting again. It says, **But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.**

Before we're too critical of this crowd, we need to consider how often the truths Christians believe are silenced by political correctness or an unwillingness to rock the boat. I've lost count of the times I've behaved like a coward. I haven't always taken a stand for what I know is true. Today we're reaping the consequences of a feckless, cowardly church that has hidden its light under a basket. So we shouldn't point a wagging finger at this crowd as though we've never done what they did.

Yet the animosity and rejection of Jesus came as no surprise to God. Though a stumbling block to the Jews, the OT prophesied their conquering Messiah would come as a suffering servant whose humble appearance lack luster entre' would seem insignificant. **Isa. 53:1-3** says, **Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.** So, on this day in history that seemed unimpressive and without significance, the confession about Christ was drowned out by political correctness and misunderstanding regarding the nature of His mission.

3. A Christ who purifies His temple – vs. 12-14 - Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.'" The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them.

What Jesus did here fulfilled the prophecy of **Mal. 3:1, 2** a prophecy made 400 yrs. before Jesus came. **"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,"** says the LORD Almighty. **But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.** The messenger sent by God was John the Baptist. The Lord the Jews were looking for is Jesus. He suddenly came to His Temple just as prophesied. He came with purifying effect like a **refiner's fire** or a **launderer's soap**. Actually, this is the second time Jesus purged His Temple. The first time was at the beginning of His ministry as recorded in **Jn. 2:13-16**. Now 3 yrs. later at the end of His ministry, Jesus returned only to find corruption as usual. When the Gospel accounts are compared, Jesus was angered by several things He saw happening in the Temple's outer court:

- *First, worshippers were being exploited.* Doves used for sacrifice, were being sold for as much as 20 x's their normal price. Because doves purchased outside the Temple were never quite pure enough for sacrifice, worshippers were forced to buy doves sold inside the Temple. Among the merchants there were also the **money changers**. Since temple taxes had to be paid in Jewish coins, Greek and Roman coins had to be changed. Illegal surcharges were imposed and the rates of exchange always favored the changers.
- *Second, some were using the Temple Court as a shortcut and thoroughfare.* All sorts of business traffic, animals and carts paraded through the place sanctified for worship.
- *Third, all this commercialism was disrespectful to God's holy place.* The sacred place had become as ordinary a market place. In those days the Temple was knick-named the **Bazaar of Annas** (the High Priest) With one hand in the till, the priests gave hearty approval to this sacrilege. But Jesus called it **"a den of robbers."**
- *Finally, the spiritual pride and elitism practiced by the Jews had all but banned the Gentiles from worship.* Mark's Gospel was written for a Gentile audience so his account of what Jesus said includes something Matthew didn't include. **Mk. 11:17** says, **"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'"** Since God is no respecter of persons... He loves the world, not just the Jews! Their holier than thou attitude was repulsive to God.

Don't you wonder why the Jewish leaders didn't resist Jesus...why they didn't forcibly stop Him? Acting alone, how could He drive them all out? There are two possibilities and I prefer the second one. Either they were frozen by guilt, (not!) or they were powerless in His presence. Like the battalion of soldiers who fell backward when Jesus said, I AM, I think the strength and courage of these men turned to Jell-O. A clue this might be the right explanation is found in the prophecy of **Mal. 3:2 - But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears?** The power and authority of Jesus Christ is irresistible. Before Him, every knee will bow.

And may I remind you...the Church is God's temple today and Jesus is Lord of it. To the church at Corinth the Apostle Paul wrote, **Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. - I Cor. 3:16, 17** In **Rev.1:13-15**, Jesus is seen standing in the midst of the 7 churches. He stands there as our inspector and judge. And what does He see? How does He evaluate what His all-seeing eyes observe? What does His penetrating vision see when He looks into my heart and yours? Does He find the faithfulness, love and purity He longs to find? Does He see His people engaged in true worship and service? Or is His Temple cluttered and corrupted by the things that don't belong there? If we belong to Him and call Him Lord...He has the right to examine and purify whatever belongs to Him.

Before we leave this section, notice **v.14 - The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and He healed them.** Jesus has authority over every realm. He has authority to purify His Temple and He has authority to heal sickness and reverse deformity in both spiritual and physical realms. But all the business and traffic in the outer court of the Temple left no place for the blind or the lame. There was no room for prayer or acts of mercy. There's a lesson here...the wonderful things God wants to do in people's lives can be stifled by things that are out of place in His Temple. His Spirit can be quenched. That's something to think about, isn't it? In the final section, notice that **children** are mentioned 3 x's. These children were boys and girls who participated in Temple worship. But we know from earlier chapters in Matthew, that **children** also represent those who are simple / humble / and believing.

4. The Children who praised – vs. 15-17 But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they were indignant. "Do you hear what these children are saying?" they asked him. "Yes," replied Jesus, "have you never read, "'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?" And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

I've always been fascinated by a part of the conversation Dr. Luke included. **Lk. 19:39, 40** say, **Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."** Israel's religious leaders had already decided that Jesus was an imposter and threat who had to be destroyed! Even after Jesus was raised from the dead, their minds didn't change. Filled with jealousy and fearful of the Romans, the Pharisees commanded Jesus to rebuke His disciples and the children who were praising Him. It was so offensive they said, **"Make them stop"!**

But God had predetermined several things to happen on this most significant day! Before the earth was created, Jesus was chosen to be Lord of all. Then on this particular day, God determined that Jesus would be presented and praised by many. God had made His choice and predetermined that someone or something would praise Jesus on Palm Sunday AD 30. And if human beings didn't praise Him, the lifeless stones would do it. When tour groups led by Chuck Missler come near the Mt. of Olives, he invites each person to pick up a small stone to take home. He says, *"tell your friends you have a stone that almost talked!"* It's a great conversation starter! Listen...if God can make a donkey talk and trees clap their hands and the starry heavens declare His glory, He can make stones talk too.

But here's what we need to know and it's a matter of highest significance. Jesus Christ is Messiah and King! He is King of kings and Lord of lords. He is not Lord because any human being / tribe / or nation, or even the church owns Him as Lord. He is Lord because God chose Him and anointed Him. He is because He is, not because we believe He is! And because Jesus is Lord of all, accepting Him is not optional. You see, God chose His Son, to be the Savior and King of creation. His plan to publically present Jesus at Passover AD 30 was predetermined. His plan included the fact that some would praise Him. If people refused...the stones would have! Do you know what this means? It means we can be replaced! If we refuse to acknowledge who Jesus is and praise Him, we can be replaced by a pile of rocks. Yet still today, God is seeking to save sinners and transform them into worshippers. His desire and pre-determined plan is that His Son be praised. Is this One who is insignificant and means nothing to so many, your savior and King? Have you trusted Him and surrendered your life to Him. The most significant question in the world is this..."What have you done with Jesus Christ?" **Jn. 1:11, 12** say, **He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--**