

Message: Who is This?

The king has returned. Long live the king!

Is that how you're feeling this morning?

Some of us are excited to join the parade with Jesus. We're ready to shout “Hosanna. Welcome to the kingdom.” We're cutting palm branches to wave with joy. We're following a royal courtesy by taking our coat off and laying it on the road. We're ready to join the Galilean crowd, enter Jerusalem, tell everyone what we know, looking to make a public statement.

Maybe you're part of the other crowd? You know, the one gathered in Jerusalem for their once a year religious obligation. You'll join hundreds of thousands of people as you gather for ceremonies, speeches, dancing, singing, festival dinners and, of course, the all important sacrifice at the temple. We don't sacrifice lambs any more, but many certainly feel the sacrificial pinch in their wallet. It's an important tradition and we don't want anything to wreck the occasion.

The king has entered Jerusalem.

Can you imagine it? The normal population has swelled from 35,000 to three or four times that number. Some have argued that millions of people would pass through Jerusalem during Passover. It would be like going to Times Square in New York City on New Year's Eve.

What a spectacle! What noise! There are people everywhere. They're shouting. They're singing. They're dancing. They're ready for the feasting to begin.

All of a sudden, there's a change. Someone new is entering the city, in an amazing way. Here comes a man on a donkey with a small crowd of 500 people gathered around him. They're treating him like a king with coats on the ground and palm branches. It's hard to imagine. Let me try to cast it in modern terms. As Jesus approaches Manhattan, he sends two of his followers on a task. Go borrow a new convertible. If anyone asks why, tell them I need it. They go, the people ask, the disciples say what Jesus told them to say. Next thing you know, he's riding in the

back of the car, waving to people and entering Times Square on New Year's Eve. They're throwing confetti and playing "Hail to the chief." They're shouting a message we all want to hear: "Welcome! Save us!" Maybe 500 people are entering, a drop in the bucket compared to the people who are already gathered, but they get everyone's attention.

There's a buzz in the air. You can feel the anticipation and excitement. Everyone knows what the palm branches mean. Since they were children, they've heard the words of Isaiah the prophet, "*A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.*" (Isaiah 9:6-7). The build up couldn't be greater. But they probably missed the words of Zechariah, a lesser prophet, who said, "*Rejoice greatly ... Sing aloud ... Look, your king will come to you. He is righteous and victorious. He is humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the offspring of a donkey*" (Zechariah 9:9).

John set the stage with a dramatic message of repentance, a call to turn back to God and be baptized. Certainly the people have heard stories of Jesus' miraculous powers ... healing the sick, feeding thousands, casting out unclean spirits, his amazing teaching.

The stage is set for something special, the arrival of a king.

There's one question on everyone's mind: who is this? What's up? Isaiah prophesied about a messiah to come, like Zechariah and Micah. The messiah is going to come and deliver everyone, just like Moses did. They'll finally throw off 100 years of Roman oppression. They'll finally see the church and state reunited, like they were under king David. Remember David? He's the king who didn't lose. And his son built the temple where we worship.

Bring us freedom, O king! Hosanna – save us!
Restore the kingdom of David.

Wait a minute ... who is this?

He’s riding on donkey. Where’s the stallion, the war horse?

He’s dressed in simple, homespun cloth. Where are the royal robes?

Where’s the crown, the scepter? His head is bare, his hands empty.

Where’s the army? He’s followed by 500 Galileans. You know, those people from the other side of the tracks, past the hated Samaritans, who worship in the wrong places.

How can the king come from there? They work with their hands. We hire them to work on our buildings and in the markets. They can’t lead us. They don’t get along with the Romans, the temple or the politicians.

How can he be the king?

We see two crowds with very different expectations. Sadly, all of them have it wrong. No one really understands what’s happening. Yeah, they see the signs. But some can’t see past their own limitations, while others can’t see where real hope lies.

Jesus, the king of kings, entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover. That’s the day we now call Palm Sunday. He entered Jerusalem just in time for the celebration of the Exodus, when the people were freed from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. As in Moses’ time, the people were crying out to God for deliverance. They wanted to be free from the oppressive rulers and lifestyles they were living. They’ve been crying out for almost 400 years since the last prophet, Malachi.

God hears the cries of people who are oppressed. God heard them in Moses’ time. God heard them in Jesus’ time. God hears them today. God always hears the cries of those suffering from injustice. God sees our tears.

There’s good news: God acted. God sent a new kind of king.

There’s a problem: they (& we) weren’t ready for Jesus as he really is. Our assumptions and preconceived ideas blind us, just as they blinded them. What they saw and heard didn’t make sense. Rather than looking with their eyes and listening with their ears, they needed to listen with their soul. They needed to go to that place deep inside, where

we connect to God. Then they would really experience what happened. We need to do the same. We aren't able to go back in time to be at the historical event, but we can go deep inside our soul and connect spiritually. That's how we see with out seeing and put our hope in what is unseen. That's the kind of hope that we'll wait patiently to have, according to Paul (Romans 8:24-25).

Jesus makes a statement. He's a radically new kind of king.

Jesus raises questions about what it means to be loyal and follow him. We aren't comfortable publically honoring Jesus and letting others know we follow him, fully and wholly. We aren't ready to find the equivalent of cloaks to spread on the road before him or branches to wave, making his coming a real festival.

Have we domesticated and trivialized our devotion to Jesus, our commitment to follow him – no matter what? We see Jesus as someone who helps us through the things we want to do anyway. Somehow, he's there to provide us with a comfortable religious experience. We don't want to make anyone uncomfortable with what we say or do. If you think that way, I invite you to look deeper.

Guess what? We're just like the people in the crowds. No one realizes who Jesus really is until we challenge ourselves to dig deeper. What's holding you back? You need to figure out the puzzle for yourself. Don't go along with the crowd. Read the testimonies of the eye witnesses. Study the writings. Serve others without condemning or judging them. Try prayer. Look deep inside. Then decide for yourself. Don't blindly turn away or blindly follow. Make up your own mind! Give your heart to Jesus. Don't hold back ... join the parade.

Then, when you think you've got it, ask yourselves this question: are you ready to obey Jesus even when you aren't sure or you disagree? That's what it means to follow with all your heart. That's what it means to acknowledge Jesus' authority. That's what it means to remember what a true king is.

The king has come. Long live the king!

Isaiah 50:4–9a (CEB)

The LORD God gave me an educated tongue to know how to respond to the weary with a word that will awaken them in the morning. God awakens my ear in the morning to listen, as educated people do. The LORD God opened my ear; I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back. Instead, I gave my body to attackers, and my cheeks to beard pluckers. I didn't hide my face from insults and spitting. The LORD God will help me; therefore, I haven't been insulted. Therefore, I set my face like flint, and knew I wouldn't be ashamed. The one who will declare me innocent is near. Who will argue with me? Let's stand up together. Who will bring judgment against me? Let him approach me. Look! The LORD God will help me. Who will condemn me?

Mark 11:1-11 (CEB)

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, saying to them, "Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.'"

They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. Some people standing around said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. Those in front of him and those following were shouting, "*Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!* Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!" Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.