

**HOSANNA**  
**Mark 11:1-11**

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If we ever needed the hope of the Messiah, it is this holy season. If we ever needed Him to ride into town and take control – it is now. Like the pilgrims proclaiming “Hosanna” 2,000 years ago, we are looking for a Savior and the healing He brings this spring, this very Palm Sunday. Our world, like theirs, is filled with fear, inundated with isolation, and the powers that plague us threaten to take away our palm branches, too.

But we refuse to relent. We bow our backs against the chaos that seeks to control us, to cripple us. Even in the midst of a pandemic, we will welcome Palm Sunday, welcome the Savior, and shout “Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem was threatening. A new, powerful, popular rabbi. The crowds were crying, “Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” The palm branches were waving. The cloaks were being cast. And the powers that like things “as they are” took note.

The King, Jesus, is coming to the capital – Jerusalem – an event captured by all four evangelists. You might have never really thought about it, but there are very few events mentioned by all four gospels. While only two gospel writers speak of His birth, all four speak of His arrival as king.

The event in Mark doesn’t seem to match the Jesus that we’ve been watching for three years of ministry. He’s allowing the crowd to shout accolades. “Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Everywhere else in the gospel of Mark He said, “Shhh. Don’t tell anybody that I’m the king.” But this time, He just let them yell. Unlike so many times before, this time Jesus just accepted their acclaim – even seemed to welcome it in some way, not so much with a sense of pride but with a sense that, at last, He would allow the procession of glory to begin – the glory of God’s kingdom having arrived in Jerusalem.

But when new powers take the throne, a new CEO sits at the head of the table, some people are smart enough to be nervous, while others just join in the gleeful shouts. The Pharisees were smart – at least smart enough to be nervous. A rabbi causing a ruckus in Jerusalem meant the Romans would step in. The powers that be will not tolerate commotion in Jerusalem, and the religious establishment of Israel will lose its opportunity of quasi-freedom for festival activities and beyond.

In Luke, the Pharisees realize that the Passover pilgrims were calling Jesus “king,” and they realized what this procession meant. They realized that the crowd was making Him out to be Messiah, so they demanded, “Rebuke Your disciples.” Hush ‘em up, these Hosannas.

Jesus Himself usually didn't need any prompting to silence accolades, for He was never comfortable with public attention of His true identity. Until now, until God's timing. "If My disciples are silent, the stones themselves will cry out."

Who's in this crowd, this crowd that cheers the Lord as He enters Jerusalem? Who makes up this motley mob of Passover pilgrims? No doubt there were Galileans who knew His miracles well, who had already heard Him declare that the kingdom of God had arrived. And now they believed it.

To be sure, there were also those there from Bethany. Why, Bethany was still abuzz over His having called Lazarus back from the dead. Some believed and some rejoiced in His power over death. Others from Bethany had run to the Pharisees to rat on Jesus. Immediately having heard that He called Lazarus from the dead, the Pharisees convened the Council. "If we let Him go on with miracles like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will intervene and take our place and nation."

Now, they were watching – watching and waiting to see if Jesus would show up in Jerusalem.

Both the pilgrims and the Pharisees were watching to see if this miracle man, who even had power over death itself, would come to the Passover. The pilgrims were watching to see what other miracles He might do. And the Pharisees were watching for the opportunity to seize Him and silence His popularity. Still others joined in the contingency from Galilee and Bethany – the blind, the lame, and the children were also lending their support to the new Messiah. Some were real believers; others just joined the crowd, watching and waiting would-be disciples.

And today, we are there. We need Him to ride in and reign in our broken lives. To replace fear with hope, the worship of material matters with awe of the true Messiah who shows us we have been bowing at the idols of our culture (the wrong altars) and forgotten about the Christ – until now, until we truly need Him.

Look at Him now. Jesus riding into the city on a young donkey. A borrowed coat placed on the beast's back for a saddle, He rides in conscious fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah, surrounded by disciples, might-be disciples, curiosity seekers, and general admirers. Don't make the mistake in thinking the Hosannas were happenstance. No, Jesus knew what was going to happen.

Look at 11:2-7

And Jesus said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one has ever sat; untie it and bring it here." If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" you say, "The Lord has need of it"; and immediately he will send it back here. They went away and found a colt tied at the door, outside in the street; and they untied it. Some of the bystanders were saying to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission. They brought the colt to Jesus and put their garments on it; and He sat on it.

Donkeys were more apt to be left unattended in the village square than were horses, which were very expensive and generally reserved for the military or the elite. The word used for the young

donkey is the same one we find in Zechariah 9:9. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; he is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Oh, the prophet had predicted it. This was the hand, the will, the act of God.

It wasn't just any colt. It was one on which no one had ever sat. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? In Luke 23:53 and John 19:41, Jesus is honored by being laid in a grave that had not previously been occupied. Normally, of course, the tombs were used for families – one set of bones pushed aside and lay another body on the shelf.

But Jesus will have a new tomb and now has an unridden colt. In fact, *m.sanh.2:5* says that after a king rides an animal, no one shall mount the animal again.

Everything about this parade and procession says king – new king looking for a throne. “If anybody asks you why you're taking the colt, just say,” Jesus instructed, “the Master has need of it.” Some might call this the right of impressment. In other words, influential and powerful people, including rabbis, in the Greco-Roman world might have a right to borrow your beast for just a moment.

I found an occurrence in antiquity in *Papyri*, #211 and cf. 414, which said that upon the arrival of a new finance minister, “We have borrowed five riding donkeys...and have got ready the forty baggage donkeys; and we have begun to make the road.” (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, p. 773) It was commonplace for kings of antiquity to take what was yours for a moment and make it theirs for the greater cause. Impressment.

It wasn't Jesus' usual mode of transportation as, most commonly, he always walked.

We'll never know who did it first, but someone in the crowd took off his cloak and attempted to make a royal runner for the new king. Then another turns and throws his cloak. Others begin to cut the palm branches and cast them in front of Him – a makeshift road for the new royalty. This spirit of jubilation catches on as the crowd waves the branches. Anticipation filled the air as the new king was entering the city of Jerusalem to claim His throne at last. As the palm branches waved, it was as if the trees were indeed clapping their hands for the Christ who had created them and who had now come among them.

But the hearts of those who had grown cold with ambition and self-importance continued to object.

On past Palm Sundays – let's be honest with ourselves this morning – sometimes in this broken world with the dark powers in control, things were good enough for some of us that we didn't really want any changes. Like the Pharisees, we were not quickly welcoming a new authority, a new king who was going to challenge our way and our will. A king who was going to threaten our little thrones and our spheres of power. You know, he might just redraw the boundaries.

Like it or not, He is redrawing the boundaries. Perhaps when the sun rises again and the shadows of sickness are cast off, we will value: family, friends, forgiveness, gratitude, grace, and presence – the presence of God, and the presence of His people, the church.

The Romans probably just watched from a distance, amused by the whole affair. Their kings ride on stallions of war. This would-be king on the back of a baby donkey seemed an oddity, and His ragtag followers made His procession seem all the more petty – the lame, the blind, the children, the peasants from Galilee and Bethany. What kind of makeshift mob is this?

Only Luke mentioned it. Look closely at the eyes of the new king as He enters the royal city. He weeps. He weeps over the destruction that awaits the very city that rejects Him – rejects Him as king. It won't take long until those chants of Hosanna, which means "save, please," these "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," will be changed and transformed into the horrible "Crucify Him. Crucify Him." They will reject Him when He proves to be a disappointment, when He doesn't end up overthrowing Rome but, rather, calls men – Jew and Gentile – to quietly live out their kingdom in their own lives in such a way as to subversively transform the world.

Here is the question: Are you threatened by Jesus?

"No pastor, I'm not threatened by Jesus."

Then you don't understand who He is. You ought to be. Aren't you afraid of having this new king parading into your life, this king who allows creation itself to shout "Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord"?

Barbara Brown Taylor says she remembers being at a retreat once where the leader asked the participants to think of someone who represented Christ in their lives. When it came time to share answers, one woman stood up and said, "I had to think long and hard about this one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"

According to John, Jesus died because He told the truth to everyone He met. He was the truth. A perfect mirror in which people saw themselves in God's own light. What happened then, on Palm Sunday, goes on happening now. In the presence of His integrity, our own pretense is exposed. In the presence of his constancy, our cowardice is brought to light. In the presence of his fierce love for God and for us, our own hardness of heart is revealed. Take Christ out of the room, and I only have to compare myself to you. You only have to compare yourself to me. But if you leave Him in the room, there is no place to hide. He is the Light of the World.

When a new king comes to town, you have one of two choices. You either fall down and worship Him, or you do everything you can to extinguish His light.

When the crowd itself realized they could not control the Christ but, rather, He demanded control of them, they changed their "Hosannas" to "Crucify Him. Crucify Him." Is this the young rabbi who tells stories about the kingdom of God, who heals the sick, who casts out the demons of hell – is He the Messiah?

Was He the real king of the cosmos, this man who oddly enters Jerusalem on the back of a baby donkey? It's a personal question. And today, as we engage with this sacred text of Mark, Jesus tries to ride into our midst. The event is recreated upon our reading.

So we, too, have to make a choice. Is He really king? It's not a detached doctrine any more. It's personal. If you say, "No, He's not the king. Away with Him. Crucify Him," then you're making Him to be a deceiver or charlatan, and you're joining those who were once disappointed with what He had to offer. And if you say, "Yes, He is king," then you're committing yourself to a journey – a journey of exploration into God through learning the person of Jesus – His life, His teachings, embracing His death and resurrection, and His people, the church.

Palm Sunday brings something of a sense of triumph. Not the triumph that would impress Rome. Not even the kind that would impress the Jerusalem crowds for very long, because He's a very different kind of king. A king who washes feet to get the dust from between the toes of His followers. A king who lays down His life, like a good shepherd dying for his sheep. A king who finds life in death and power in servanthood. What kind of king is this – a king who reigns from a splintery throne?

I hear the clacking of the hoofs now. The king is here. He's arrived. The parade of power is in our midst. You can't stop Him or slow His arrival. Those who tried to stop Him by putting Him on the cross, simply empowered Him in a way that God had planned all along.

The king is here. Hosanna. Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

And we – both you and me – are ready for Him to ride in and reign as never before. Today we realize we were fools to ever think we had the cosmos under control. Self-deluded to think we determined our own futures. Naive to think we knew what tomorrow would hold.

So pick up a palm branch. Join the pilgrims who shout, "Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes – the Christ – in the name of the Lord."