

ASCENDING TO JERUSALEM
Luke 19:28-40

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
September 6, 2020

What makes you really nervous? What would you go to any length to stop?

People in power get really nervous when a new king enters the land. For example, King Michael, Romania's deposed monarch, returned to Bucharest in December of 1990. This was his first visit to Romania after the Communist rulers forced him into exile forty-three years before in the aftermath of WW2.

When the sixty-nine year old king arrived, he made no comment to reporters but headed directly to a monastery where his ancestors are buried. The fact that the king returned after four decades of being away sent a tremor through Romania's political landscape.

King Michael didn't make it more than sixty miles outside of Bucharest before police stopped his entourage and escorted him back to the airport, demanding his immediate departure. They had advised him not to come. A source close to the situation said, "The Romanian authorities are very, very worried about the king's return." Rightly so. A crowd of demonstrators gathered around Bucharest's University Square chanting the king's name and declaring his royalty. What makes you really nervous? When a new king arrives and threatens to de-throne you? To take your power? To challenge who you are and how you live? Maybe it's not just those in Romania who are afraid of the king's arrival. Maybe we all are afraid, or maybe we should be, because a new king means new authority. New authority means a loss of our own circles of power. When a king arrives, we ought to get nervous.

Like King Michael's return to Romania, the Davidic king, in the person of Jesus, returned to Jerusalem. Not only was he David's descendant, he was also David's Lord. The arrival of Jesus made many nervous.

Sights and sounds of the miracles of Jesus were fresh on the minds of the pilgrims on a Jerusalem journey toward Passover. Passover, the great Jewish feast that represented freedom, represented liberation from slavery in Egypt. Passover. You remember, when the death angel passed over the first-born of the people of God as it struck the first-born of Egyptian homes. The angel skipped over the Israelite homes because they were marked by the blood of the lamb. This Passover celebration linked the feasters with the exodus not merely by way of the long-range memory of the ancient event, but by constituting them again and again as the covenant people of God, as a people set free.

There are not many events mentioned by all four gospels, but the triumphal entry of Jesus is one of those events that not a single evangelist misses. Only two speak of his birth, but all four speak of this arrival as King. The event itself doesn't seem to match the Jesus that we've been watching for three years of ministry in the gospels. His allowing the crowd to shout like that seemed a curious departure from his usual aversion to acclaim.

Like the crowd greeting the arrival of King Michael in Romania, the pilgrims shout accolades to Jesus, their new king. "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in Heaven and glory in the highest!" (19:38).

Instead of "Hosanna in the highest heaven," which frames the cries in Matthew 21:9 (cf. Mark 11:9; John 12:13), Luke has "peace in heaven and glory in the highest." The cries echo the words of the angel Gabriel, who announces Jesus' conception to Mary (1:32-33), and the angelic choristers who announce his birth to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace" (2:14). (David Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, 771-72)

He just let them yell. Unlike so many times before, this time Jesus just let them yell. Clearly, they were calling him king. And, he allowed it. Even seemed to welcome it in some way. Not so much with a sense of pride, but in the sense that at last he would allow the procession of the glory to begin. The glory of God's kingdom having arrived when he arrived.

But when a new king arrives, some folks are smart enough to be nervous while others just join in the gleeful acclaim. The Pharisees were smart enough to be nervous. They realized that if he made a ruckus in Jerusalem, all would be lost. The Romans will 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 the festival activities and beyond.

Luke's account speaks of the Pharisees in the crowd who realized that the Passover pilgrims were calling Jesus king. They realized what this procession meant. They realized that the crowd was making him out to be Messiah. And so they demand, "Rebuke your disciples." Jesus himself usually didn't need any prompting to silence accolades for he was never comfortable with public attention of his Messiahship until now. Until God's timing. "If my disciples are silent, the stones themselves will cry out."

Jesus' arrival in the city is so momentous that it requires a response – if not a human one then another. Possibly, it is an allusion to Gentiles, who were regarded as insentient stones when it came to understanding anything related to God. But when Jesus dies on the cross, a Gentile declares that he is righteous (23:47). (Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*, p. 772-73)

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 from Bethany. Bethany was still abuzz over his just having called Lazarus back from the dead. Some believed and rejoiced in his power over death. Others 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." They were watching, and they were 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. The Pharisees were watching for the opportunity to seize him and to silence his popularity.

Still others joined 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.

See 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.

We'll never know who did it first. But someone in the crowd took off his cloak and attempted to make a royal carpet for the new king. Then another runs ahead and throws his cloak. Others begin to cut the palm branches and cast them in front of him, and wave them. The spirit of jubilation catches on as the crowd waves the branches. Anticipation filled the air as the new king was entering the great 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. Sometimes, be honest with me this morning, sometimes in this broken world, with the dark powers in control, things are good enough for some of us that we don't really want any changes. We ourselves might be like the Pharisees, and we might not quickly welcome a new authority, a new king who's going to challenge our will and our way. A king who's going to threaten our little thrones, threaten our spheres of power.

Jerusalem's hardened spiritual condition is epitomized by its failure to welcome its king. He is not met by city officials, nor feted by the leading citizens nor escorted back to the city. The encounter with the Pharisees is a rejection, and the nonappearance of the high priests, other officials, and the citizens of Jerusalem is an affront. The rejection is made clearer by the fact that Luke has gone to some lengths to stress that Jesus is king. Although he is the king, he is not received as one by Jerusalem. (Garland, p. 768)

The Romans, as they watched at a distance, were probably 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 motley mob is this?

Only Luke mentions it (19:41), but look closely. Look at the eyes of the King as he gets a glimpse of Jerusalem. He weeps. 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! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" will be changed, transformed to 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, both Jew and Gentile, to quietly live out the Kingdom in their own lives in such a way as to subversively transform the world.

Are you threatened by Jesus? You ought to be. Are you afraid of this new King? 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 that one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it that 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, 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 life. 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's no place to hide. He is the Light of the World.

In his presence people either fall down and worship him, or do everything they can to extinguish his light. When the crowd themselves realized they could not control the Christ, but rather he demanded control of them, they changed their hosannas to "Crucify, crucify, crucify Him!"

The pilgrims were asking the question: Is this young rabbi - who tells stories about the kingdom of God, heals the sick, and casts out the demons of hell - the Messiah? Is He the Son of God?

Since Jesus has walked everywhere else in his ministry and did not mount the colt until he reaches the eastern boundary of the city, this departure from his custom is a calculated symbolic act. Actions speak louder than words but not always as clearly. The disciples recognize the subtle messianic connotations. Zechariah 9:9 (see also 1 Kings 1:32-35) lies behind Jesus' pointed choice of riding in on a colt:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Horses were associated with war, and according to the psalmist, the war horse's image of great might is connected to the vain hope of military victory (Psalm 33:17; see Proverbs 21:31; Isaiah 43:17; Zechariah 9:10; see Revelation 6:2-8). The colt in Zechariah's context is connected to peace and humility. That this particular colt had not been ridden before makes it suitable for a sacred purpose and worthy of a king. (Garland, p. 669-70)

Was he the real King of the cosmos, this man who oddly enters Jerusalem on the back of a baby donkey? This king who has nothing but a ragtag band of followers throwing down their coats and waving the branches? The question's a personal one. Again today, he rides into our midst and we have to answer the question. Is he really King? It's not theory. It's not detached doctrine. It's personal.

If you say no, he's not the King, away with him, crucify him, not willing to admit the changes he wants to bring to your life, then you're making him to be a deceiver or charlatan, and you're joining those who once disappointed with what he had to offer, so quickly pushed him aside...in fact, they want to annihilate him. But if you say yes, he is God, yes, he is King, then you are committing yourself to a journey. A journey of exploration into God through learning the person of Jesus. His life, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection. (N.T. Wright, *The Original Jesus*, page 86.)

His entry brings something of a sense of triumph. But not the triumph that would impress Rome. Not even the kind that would impress the Jerusalem crowds for very long, because he's a different kind of king. A king that washes feet to get the dust from between the toes of his followers. A king that 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 finds victory in suffering.

Jesus enters the city to die and will be enthroned as king on a cross, which will bring even greater benefactions to the people. The greatest mighty work, the resurrection, which is to be worked by God, awaits. (Garland, p. 771)

The hard thing about this King is that he asks us to do the same. "You call me Teacher and Lord, and if I can wash your feet, surely you can wash each other's." He asks us to be baptized so that we can see that if we die with him, we also rise with him.

Jesus didn't deny our inner sense of competition. You want to be great? Well, the greatest will be the youngest, and the one who rules will be the one who serves. His kingdom was based on service and humility.

"Well, if that's all he has to offer, send him to the cross." That's what most conclude. I hear the clacking of the hoofs of the donkey now. The King is here. He's arrived. In reality, you can't stop or slow his arrival, for 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. He's here. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!