

Sermon – The Coming Kingdom
Scripture Readings – Zechariah 9:9-12, Mark 11:1-11
Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015
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Our first reading for today comes from the penultimate book of the Old Testament, that of the prophet Zechariah, whose words were written during the rule of the Persian Empire, and whose prophecies included a coming deliverer and king sent from a God whose power was over all the nations and whose promise was restoration and peace. Hear these words from the book of Zechariah, chapter 9, verses 9 through 12.

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. 11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. 12 Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Our 2nd reading relates a scene described in all 4 Gospels: Jesus riding into Jerusalem to great acclaim, echoing closely the prophetic language of the Zechariah passage, and yet its triumph rendered strange in the hearing by our own foreknowledge that crucifixion follows very closely after. Listen for the Word of God to you in this passage, from Mark 11:1–11.

1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: The Coming Kingdom

Text: "...triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey..." Zechariah 9:9

To a people whose ancestors were citizens of a kingdom established directly by God, given a land and a promise, a blessing and a covenant, the arrival of a messiah is surely the light at the end of the tunnel. The tunnel had been long: seventy years of exile, followed by returning to over five centuries of continued subjection to other kingdoms and empires. Israel had been under the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and now the Romans, but for six hundred years never truly under its own rule.

For any people who had a cultural memory of themselves as a great nation, this would be hard to take. As long as such a people continued to recognize themselves as a distinct people at all, it could not but inspire longing for a day when the current order would be overturned and the previous

greatness restored. But for a people whose greatness was tied to the faithfulness of their God, the idea that such a day would eventually come *had* to be true. If it did not come, either their foundation and their identity as a people were false from the beginning, or else God, having formerly established them as a people, had now abandoned them, and they were truly this people no more.

And so as this man Jesus approaches Jerusalem, this man who has been healing, and teaching, and even bringing the dead back to life, we hear, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!”¹ The tunnel does have a light at its end, and the once kingdom of David is also the future kingdom of David.

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he.”²

He sat on the colt; he rode in, as the people shouted. “Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and ”...looked around at everything and then went home, because it was kind of late.³

In Mark, the shortest and the fastest Gospel, where practically every other sentence starts with the word “immediately,” such an anticlimax is startling. So out of place with the tempo of the book, so out of place in a triumphant entry of one coming to overthrow the regime, a strange pause such as this gives us pause. “[W]hen he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” It inserts the pedestrian into the regal; we see the human-ness in the anointed one of God.

And maybe in that pause, we go back, and we look a little more at the prophecy from Zechariah. Indeed, there are the elements we expect, that by this king for whom the people have waited, the nation’s battles will be ended and peace will come; and there is mention of something even greater, that his dominion will not be merely Israel but will extend to the ends of the earth; but there is also a very odd juxtaposition in his depiction. “Triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.” “Triumphant,” “victorious,” and “humble”—one of these things is not like the others.

In fact, it goes further than that. For “humble” is the weakest, the least harsh, of the possible translations of this word. “Poor,” “needy,” “weak,” “afflicted,” “wretched,” and “lowly” are connoted here, in the very verse that calls for rejoicing, in the very passage which declares that this ruler will command peace to the nations and govern the whole earth.

There is a vision here of something at odds with how we normally see things. We can imagine majesty, and we can envision humility, but humble majesty is a difficult and confusing concept, even after the two thousand years we’ve had to absorb the notion of a messiah hanging on a cross.

Mark makes it clear, however, that this, humble majesty, is what we have in Christ. Jesus did not go up to Jerusalem as messiah only to find himself *instead* encountering arrest and execution. He went up to Jerusalem as messiah *specifically in order to* accept arrest and execution. Mark tells us that Jesus foretold this outcome three times, the last almost immediately before this triumphant entrance: “He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, ‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.’”⁴ In other

¹ Mark 11:9-10 (NRSV).

² Zechariah 9:9 (NRSV).

³ Mark 11:11 (NRSV).

⁴ Mark 11:32b-34 (NRSV).

words, he will be afflicted, wretched, and lowly, and yet victorious. This is what he rides triumphantly to, with full intent.

And so we see that this is a messiah for whom lowering himself to the very bottom rung is not only compatible with triumphant victory, it is *the means by which that victory is achieved*. It is fully intentional and a complete overturning of worldly power. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. We remember the words of Paul to the Philippians, describing a Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient...to the point of death on a cross.”⁵ And “[t]herefore,” Paul continues, “God also highly exalted him...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend.”⁶

Another interesting way of expressing this can be found sometimes if you read older prayers or older translations of Christian writings. Occasionally you will come across praise to God for having “condescended” to us. To contemporary ears, that sounds rather odd, to thank God for condescending. But if we stop and we look at the word “condescend” carefully, we will notice that it is made up of the prefix “con-,” which means something like “with,” and “descend,” which means “to go lower.” The original and primary meaning of the word, therefore, is to come down to be with others, not holding oneself above them but lowering oneself to be at their level; or, as one dictionary puts it, “to descend to a less formal or dignified level” or “to waive the privileges of rank.”⁷

Of course, humans being what we are, we like to exhibit pride even for the act of humbling ourselves—don’t try to tell me you aren’t tempted, when you act humbly, to be *seen* acting humbly and therefore receive praise for it. In this way we turn humility into its opposite. Thanks to this impressive ability we have to disguise self-inflation as self-reduction, it is common (as I’m sure you are well aware) for people to condescend in a different way altogether; that is, to put on, for all to see, the *air* of one descending to the level of others. When, rather than simply meeting someone else at that person’s level, we make a show of lowering ourselves, we aren’t really lowering ourselves at all; we are acting out the part of one descending in order to demonstrate how high up we really are. This is how the word “condescending” gets its secondary meaning, of displaying a smug superiority, and it is a sad testament to the universality of pride that this second meaning has become more common than the first.

The other reason it is sad is that the word captured so well the nature of God’s mission to us in Christ Jesus. God, the sovereign creator of the universe, unquestionably our superior by uncountable orders of magnitude, came to our level, waived the privileges of Godly rank, took human form, became one of us, even died as one of us, the death of a wretched, powerless outcast.

This is the Christ we are invited to follow.

For those words I quoted from Philippians 2, Jesus having emptied himself of his equality with God, taken human form, and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross, are not just a description, they are also an admonition. Paul tells his readers, in the face of this, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus makes a regular habit of calling for humility. In Luke 14, he instructs, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the

⁵ Philippians 2:6-8 (NRSV).

⁶ Philippians 2:9-10 (NRSV).

⁷ *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, G & C Merriam Co., 1974.

lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."⁸

This can be read simply as practical advice to avoid public disgrace, but seeing how thoroughly the theme runs through Jesus's teachings of the prideful being knocked down and God lifting up the lowly, it is hard to see it as only a bit of helpful advice for use when attending First Century wedding banquets. In Mark 9, after the disciples had argued about who was the greatest, Jesus "sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'"⁹ And the terms of call of Christianity are stated even more directly and clearly just one chapter earlier: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."¹⁰

So there is no denying that we are asked to adopt humility after the fashion of Jesus, even knowing his humble obedience takes him to a very uncomfortable place.

What does it mean to be humble, then? Does it mean not looking down on others? Partly. And thinking of oneself as superior comes in many forms, not just haughtiness or smugness. Disdain, disrespect, dismissiveness, expecting higher class treatment than other people, seeing another's life or work as "beneath you," seeing yourself as "out of that person's league," or being embarrassed at being seen with a certain person are all expressions of thinking yourself better than someone else.

But following Christ in this is not only about purifying your own attitude, it is also the path to loving others as yourself. Putting yourself above others does not treat them "as yourself". Looking down on others does not allow you to look them in the eyes and know them. Seeing others face-to-face, being alongside them rather than above them, is how we best love them. God did not just look down from on high but came and met us where we are, and who are we then to refuse to do the same to others?

Humility also means caring little for one's own status or honor, in other people's eyes or our own, although I caution against one mistake we easily make here. Humility is about lessening ourselves. Sometimes we try to be humble instead by insulting or denigrating what we have done or something we have accomplished, and I think that often misses the proper target.

For a silly little example, perhaps you have just made someone a fancy omelet, taking care to do it well, and resulting in a highly enjoyable meal. When that person exclaims, "That was the one of best omelets I've ever had!" reacting with pride and bragging about yourself as a cook is certainly not humble.

But neither is falsely claiming that the food was not really that good. Besides being a lie and therefore problematic for other reasons, it still ties high regard for the omelet to high regard for you and thus implicitly agrees that if, in fact, the omelet *were* good after all, you *would* deserve praise. And of course you know perfectly well that the omelet was good, and that the person won't stop believing it to be good just because you pooh-poohed it, so saying this does little more than pretend at humility while in reality completely agreeing that you should be praised for it. In fact, saying it was nothing much actually implies you are such a good chef that this kind of quality is no big deal for the likes of you.

⁸ Luke 14:8-11 (NRSV).

⁹ Mark 9:35 (NRSV).

¹⁰ Mark 8:34 (NRSV).

The truly humble reply might be something more like, "I am pleased that it turned out so well," or, "I am glad you enjoyed it." This removes you and the credit due you from the equation altogether.

When we stop worrying about receiving credit, honor, and respect, and care for those things only in that we credit, honor, and respect others, then we are starting to live the kind of humility Jesus demonstrated. When we regard ourselves as side-by-side with our neighbors and not above them, then we can be in fellowship with them, then we can give of ourselves to them without it coming from a haughty place, then we can recognize that we are in the same boat with them as sinners needing the grace of God.

Jesus showed us "humble majesty". He was the king, and he did not belittle what he did, he simply did it from a low station rather than a high one. He still *inhabited* his actual rank in the universe, commanding demons, healing sicknesses, and undoing death, but he waived the privileges of that rank for himself, did not regard it "as something to be exploited, but emptied himself."

The people saw the triumphant entrance to Jerusalem as the light which had finally come. But we, who know what is to come after, know that there is a tunnel at the end of the light. We know hard things lie directly ahead, in a journey that takes him, and us, all the way to death on a cross.

I invite you all to join together in worshipful contemplation of the fullness of that journey this week. The three most important events in all human history since the fall from Eden are the birth, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and so it is my opinion that Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter are actually the three most important holy remembrances in our Christian liturgical year. One of those usually gets left out, in its somberness, but Jesus did not say, "See you on the other side," he said, "Take up your cross and follow me." And so we will recall this week, Thursday, Friday, and finally Sunday, something of where his path took him between the entrance to Jerusalem and the resurrection. In fact, the Holy Week gatherings are technically one, long service. Maundy Thursday worship contains no benediction, but sets the Passion story in motion and stops, only to resume on Friday, and Good Friday worship closes in silent contemplation of the dark pause in the universe when Jesus descended to the dead, concluding when we resume again by emerging into the glory of Easter Sunday.

Blessed is the coming kingdom, with its strange king who comes both triumphant and humble, not merely standing at the end of the tunnel as the light, but traversing the tunnel with us in order to take us with him out into the light. Hosanna! Amen.