

Faces Firmly Fixed on Jesus: Arrival

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 19:28-40

So we come to the edge of Holy week. We have been following Jesus to Jerusalem. His journey began back in Luke 9:51 where we read that Jesus firmly fixed his face towards Jerusalem. Ten chapters ago he began the journey to the place where he knew he would die for us and for the world. Jesus has been journeying toward Jerusalem; today is the day he arrives. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and he's received like a king. That's by design. If you listen to the reading, you will hear that Jesus intends to come into Jerusalem on a donkey and he does it as a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. Jesus' choice of conveyance is meant to signal that he is the promised King.

I want to start this sermon by focusing in on the crowd. Let's zoom in on the people who welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. There they are lining the sides of the road as Jesus enters through the gate on the donkey. They are shouting. They are waving. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" they cry. They lay their coats down on the road. They are very excited. There's an electricity in the air! What's fueling all this excitement? I think if I had to sum that up in one word it would be *expectancy*. These people have great expectations and high hopes. What expectations? What hopes? What do they think Jesus will do? It's hard to know exactly. Probably everyone in the crowd has slightly different hopes. Probably there as many different hopes as there are people. But we can have some idea of the kind of things they're hoping for by listening to their words. And I think there are two main hopes.

Many of them are excited because they expect Jesus to bring a new political order. They think the man on the donkey will bring a political revolution! You can tell that from the Psalm they quote. "*Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!*" That's a quote from the Psalm we read right at the beginning of this service, Psalm 118. What is Psalm 118 about? It's the song of a man, a warrior, who triumphs over his enemy. His enemy surrounded him on every side but, by the power of the Lord, he strikes them down. Now he's celebrating his victory by leading a procession up to the altar, waving branches as he goes. "*With boughs in hand join the festal procession up to the altar!*" (118:27) By shouting the words of Psalm 118 and waving palms, the crowd shows that they hope Jesus has come to win a great triumph over their enemies, the Romans.

The crowd also shows its political hopes when the people lay down their coats in front of Jesus. When they put down their coats, they are echoing an Old Testament story. Do you hear the echo? 2 Kings 9:13. Jehu is anointed King of Israel by the prophet Elisha. As soon as the anointing is done, all the other courtiers "take off their cloaks and spread them out under him on the bare steps." It was their way of acknowledging the new king. So, when people spread their coats in front of Jesus and the donkey it shows us that many of them hope that Jesus will be a king like Jehu. What kind of king was Jehu? He was a revolutionary warrior. He overthrew the existing regime. He rode into Samaria and destroyed the power of King Ahab. So, some in the crowd are cheering because they are thinking, "The new Jehu is here! He will overthrow our Roman oppressors! He will bring back the golden years of Israel!"

Do hopes for political change still draw excited crowds today? Yes they do. Do crowds still wave and shout for political leaders today? Yes. Yes they do. We will see a lot of that between now and November 2020. These crowds will wave placards instead of palm branches,

but their hopes will be the same. We humans have always been ready to cheer for someone who will bring great social change.

That's what some of the people are hoping for, but not all of them. Not everything is political. I'm sure that many of the people are cheering Jesus, not because they think he will take care of the Romans; but because they think he will take care of their personal pain. You see, they knew about Jesus' miracles. They had heard about blind men getting sight, and the lame walking, and the deaf hearing. And so when they wave their branches and shout, they're not thinking about a new political order, they are thinking about their sick child. They're thinking about their bad back which is keeping them from working. They're thinking about their daughter who won't speak to them anymore. They're thinking about the personal problems and personal pains that press on their hearts like a weight. They cheer and wave because they hope Jesus will be the one to lift that weight and sooth that pain. Do you know what the word Hosanna means? I think most of us think of it as a cry of praise. It's not. It means, "Lord Save us!" It comes from Psalm 118 as well. It's actually two words in the Hebrew: Hosiah Na – literally "Save Now!" So while it's a word of praise, it's praise with an edge of desperation and need. Hosanna! You're wonderful, but please, please help me!

Is this still a deeply held human hope? Do people still line up for a person who can take away their personal pain? Yes. The lines at the miracle shrines are long, TV healers still do a brisk business, and last year we spent 3.5 trillion dollars on health care. We will do almost anything and pay almost anything if we think it will take care of those traumas that keep us wide awake in the middle of the night.

So the people cheer and wave at Jesus because they have these two deep human hopes: political change and delivery from personal pain. Does this King fulfill these hopes? Does Jesus meet these expectations? Well, does he give them political change? No. He doesn't overthrow the Romans. He doesn't even speak out against them! In fact he speaks out against corruption in the temple. And when people ask him whether or not they should pay taxes to their oppressors, he doesn't say no, he says render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Does he heal their personal pain? Does he sooth their personal hurts and worries. No. He doesn't do that either. He did all sorts of miracles out in the countryside of Galilee, he did miracles in Jericho, he did miracles in Bethany, but when he gets to Jerusalem he does no miracles. Instead, he goes to the temple every day and preaches these confrontational sermons.

How do you think the crowd felt about that? Do you think they were angry at Jesus for failing to meet their high hopes and great expectations? It seems like it. It seems like they were angry enough to crucify him. Go look at the things that the people yell at Jesus on the cross. They accuse him of being a phony king, who can't even save himself. They express anger that he hasn't delivered them personally: save yourself and us! Remember what Hosanna means! Save us! Now they are yelling it at him again, this time sarcastically. "Save yourself if you're such a great king!"

What shall we say about this? Does Jesus not care about the injustice of the Romans? Does Jesus not care about the personal pains of these people? Of course he cares. Jesus hates injustice. He does come to overthrow tyrants. As Mary sang in her song at the beginning of this gospel, he scatters the proud and he will bring down unjust rulers from their thrones. And of course Jesus cares about our personal pains. Jesus spent after day after day in Galilee embracing the personal pain of thousands and thousands of people who crowded to him. He wept at his friend's funeral. Jesus will end all injustice. Jesus will wipe away every tear.

So it's not that he doesn't care, it's just that this King is starting his conquering work with something deeper, he starts by conquering territory that is deeper and more tightly guarded. He is after our heart. He's starting by conquering our soul. The people at the gate of Jerusalem shouting Hosanna have a to-do list for Jesus: get rid of Roman injustice, take away my aches and

pains. Jesus pushes that list aside, he says never mind all that, I will get to those problems in time, but the revolution that I bring starts in your soul. I will bring justice, I will bring down rulers from their throne! I will make the crooked straight, but the first crooked thing I want to remake is your heart.

This is how Jesus comes to us too. He makes a triumphal entry into our life and we greet him with our to-do list. *“Lord I am so glad you are here! I know exactly what needs cleaning up. Here are the social problems I want you to take care of...you probably saw my Facebook posts. And here are my personal worries for my health and for my family.”* But when Jesus arrives in your life, while he cares about the things on your list, he seems to have a different list. You want him to take care of your problems. You want him to take away the things you are ready to relinquish, but Jesus starts by going after things you don’t want to let go. You wanted a cosmetic overhaul: a coat of paint here and a new countertop there, but he starts taking out supporting walls and the central pillars that you’d been using to prop yourself up. Maybe he sees how proud you are of your professional success and he starts kicking at those foundations. ‘Not my success Jesus! If people don’t see me as a success, who am I?’ “You are my child of course. And success is nothing to build a life on. Or maybe He sees how proud you are of your good looks, how much of your self-image rests on your vanity so he starts banging away at that, because vanity is nothing to build a life on. Maybe he sees how completely obsessed you are with things – maybe it’s your dream house – and he makes it so that when you finally get the home of your dreams you fell restless and unfulfilled, because things are nothing to build a life on. We wanted Jesus to take care of our pains and he starts taking out the good stuff. He warned us that this is what it would be like. He told Nicodemus, *“Truly I say to you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.”* It was never going to be a cosmetic procedure; it was always major surgery. He will make you a new person even if it hurts you and kills him.

So now that you know what kind of King this is, now that you know his intentions, do you want to follow him the rest of the way? We’ve been walking with him all through Lent, and now we are less than a week away from the end of the journey where we will stand under the cross look up and see our dying king, hanging from a terrible throne and wearing a crown of thorns. I think it’s only fair that I ask you, do you want to follow this King the rest of the way? Do you want to go to that place and face him, to look up and realize what your sin cost him and to realize that he will demand your life your soul your all. Many people leave the path at this point. They go back to the other ‘rulers’ and powers of this world. They go back to chasing success, or vanity, or pleasure or popularity – the usual suspects. They’ve been building their identity on those things for so long, and it’s hard for them to let go. But if you are willing to follow the man on the donkey this week, if you are willing to follow him through the pain of Gethsemane and through the judgment hall of Pilate. If you are willing to walk behind him as he carries his cross through the streets of Jerusalem under a hail of insults and spit, if you are willing to watch him hang on the cross for you, if you are willing to go with this king, he will make you new. He will take hold of your life. He will uproot your pride, your vanity, your fear, your shame, and in their place he will plant humility, patience, compassion, and a love that never stops.

Our king has arrived. He is full of a love that is both fierce and wonderful. Let us go with him.

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