

John 12:12-19 [NIV]

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³ They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!"

¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: ¹⁵ "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."

¹⁶ At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

¹⁷ Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸ Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

We're in John, chapter 12, today — actually going back in time a bit from where we've been, from where we were last Sunday. We're going back to today, to the beginning of Holy Week, to the Sunday *before* the Sunday of Jesus' resurrection.

Some call it simply the "Fifth Sunday in Lent," and some call it "Passion Sunday." We, of course, typically call it "Palm Sunday," and I need to tell you, I've been waiting for Palm Sunday.

I told somebody last week, "I need Palm Sunday!" This year especially, I need Palm Sunday — *we* need Palm Sunday. The *Church*, the Church of Jesus Christ, needs Palm Sunday. We need an opportunity to celebrate. Specifically, we need a reason to celebrate a person — a leader who is really worthy of real celebration.

You see, here's the thing: in our day and time, our ability to communicate information has outstripped our morality. Because of technology, we are now capable of knowing more than ever before about other people and especially about those in leadership at all different levels, both here and around the world.

We hear, now almost instantly, about what the world's important people do, what they think, what they say.

And at the same time, it seems like there is less and less good to know about them, and, look, I'm not just talking about our president, past or current. I'm talking about leaders of state making terrible and tragic decisions all around the world, and I'm talking about leaders of business and of ministries that are doing the same.

And, you know, it gets to you after a while.

I don't know about you, but I get too wrapped up in the news for my own good. I get too emotionally involved and I start to internalize all this stuff that's

reported about those in leadership — and honestly, it's depressing. I get tired of hearing about the sellouts and lies and the sexual sins and vulgarities and the hypocrisy in their lives. It keeps people tuned in — sure it does. It makes for great ratings, but it also makes for deflated souls.

And again, I don't mean just here in the U.S. It's all around the world. You follow just about anyone in high leadership for a while and you begin to think, "Man, where is the world heading?" You wonder if there are any good, decent, God-fearing leaders left out there that will just do the right thing, speak the truth when they need to, stay quiet when they need to, and admit it when they're wrong.

Friends, we need Palm Sunday.

You know why?

We need Palm Sunday to remind us that there remains in our lives and in this world one leader — one King — who really is worthy of admiration, worthy of celebration, and worthy of praise.

Palm Sunday reminds us that we have hope. The world has hope, because there remains one Leader — one King — who has not fallen to the temptations of this world and is not simply "in it for Himself and His own gain."

Palm Sunday assures us that there remains one King who really does love His people — one Leader whom power has not corrupted.

Palm Sunday declares that there is still one King who is entirely worthy of all the praise and worship He's offered — and a lot more — and His name is Jesus Christ.

No matter what happens at the statehouse in Frankfort, or on Capitol Hill in DC, or in the innermost rooms of the Vatican in Rome...

No matter what happens in any place where earthly power resides, what happened on that Jerusalem Road on this day reminds you and me, "No matter what happens here, all is not lost in this world. There is still a King who is good."

This day, Palm Sunday, began the week that would change our world forever.

And what a week it was! It was a week full of ups and downs — a week full of intrigue and lies, political maneuvering, slander, manipulation; it was the kind of political and religious scandals that make the stuff of today look utterly tame by comparison.

You see, political scandal is nothing new. There has never been a more effective job of railroading, injustice, irresponsibility, and dishonesty than there was in Jerusalem a little over 2000 years ago. No greater atrocity has ever been pulled off than what was pulled off in Jerusalem at the expense of Jesus.

It helps me today to know that Jesus understands politics. He's been through politics at its worst.

All four of the gospels speak, in some form, about the crowd's exaltation of Jesus as He approached Jerusalem. And, in truth, they did what they did for different reasons.

Some in the crowds really believed that Jesus was, in fact, the national messiah who many in Israel expected would come and overthrow the Romans. They expected their messiah to "make Israel great again," to restore to her the earthly glory she used to possess.

They weren't thinking eternally. They weren't able to lift their eyes above their own national interests and see the things that God was trying to do on a much larger scale.

And, by the way, that can happen to us too. We can, as one writer put it, "immanentize the eschaton." We can just as easily fall into the trap of investing everything *here*—of thinking that *this* is all there is.

Listen: God's people don't do that. Sure, we love our country and care for our world, but God's people think about the present always in the context of the eternal.

Those crowds didn't, so some of them, many of them, wanted Jesus to be merely a national messiah.

Others there that day had watched Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, or they'd heard about it. And so, even though they didn't know who He was exactly, they knew they wanted to be on His side. They wanted to stick close to anyone who could bring someone back to life. So, they followed Him for His power, like those who followed Him after he'd fed them by the lake—to see what else they might receive.

There were also people in the crowd who were just caught up in the mob mentality of the moment.

The population of Jerusalem at least tripled during Passover, so you can imagine what the city must have been like. You could barely walk down the street for the wall-to-wall people; children were running around; animals were everywhere—the pack animals and the sacrifices (donkeys, goats, sheep, birds), you know. The people would have been carried away with all the noises and smells and intensity of the day.

What happened there on the Jerusalem Road as Jesus came into town was a completely un-orchestrated, but highly contagious, explosion of praise that just spread and spread and spread—faster than the Coronavirus.

And Jesus let it happen.

That may be the most interesting thing, to me, about this day.

Jesus let it all happen.

Jesus let the praise happen.

That was a first, you know?

Every other time someone wanted to make a big deal over Him, Jesus wouldn't let them do it. He told them to go home and not tell anyone who He was or what He'd done.

And if they didn't listen, if they *did* go and try to exalt Jesus in the town or in the crowd or wherever, He would slip away. He would escape, as quietly as He could, out of the public eye.

Where are the leaders like that today, huh?

Where are the kings—where are the leaders—who will deflect even the credit they deserve?

Every other time, that was Jesus' way.

But this time was different.

You know what happened: Jesus commandeers a donkey, the animal of kings—but of kings who come in *peace*, kings who are not at war, but kings who are in control of their surroundings.

Jesus borrows a donkey and rides it into town.

And the people understood what this meant, and in response the people began to drop their outer robes—their jackets—on the ground in front of him. It was a sign of honor and respect, and Jesus let them do it. He accepted their honor. He walked on their coats, and He let the donkey He was riding walk on them too.

He let the crowds wave the palm branches in the air in His honor.

You know what the palm branch was? It was the original pom-pom.

Really! You heard about this discovery just last week of new Dead Sea Scroll fragments? Some of those were pictures of the cheerleaders of Jerusalem High School using palm branches at football games.

No, that's not true—that last part anyway. But they really were used like that. The palm branch was the first century equivalent of those big, foam number one fingers.

It was the symbol of praise for the winner, and they waved them at Jesus.

And He received their praise. He let them shout, "*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

It was all completely appropriate, period treatment for a king. And although there had been other opportunities, never before had Jesus accepted it.

But He did on this day.

In fact, when some of the Pharisees complained to Him about it, Jesus told them, "*Hey, on this day, someone has to celebrate. If I tell the people to be quiet, the rocks are gonna do it!*"

Because whether or not they realized it, a leader—a king truly worthy of praise—was in their midst.

Pause

Aren't you glad Jesus let Palm Sunday happen?

Not just because it fulfilled prophecy.

Not just because the religious leaders needed to see it.

Not just because Jesus deserved every last word.

Not even because the rocks would have cried out if it hadn't, although on one hand, that would have been really cool to watch.

I'm glad Jesus let Palm Sunday happen, selfishly, because today I need—we need, the world needs—the hope it represents. We need the opportunity to celebrate someone worthy of celebration.

And Jesus, knowing how this world has come to work—I think Jesus knew we'd need it.

Listen, if you haven't noticed, we live in a world of lying kings and corrupt leaders.

And that's not pessimistic—that's just reality. God told Israel centuries ago, "*If you demand a king, he'll take you to the cleaners,*" and that's just what happened—and it has happened over and over again, all through history. That's just the way it is.

But Palm Sunday reminds us that there does exist a king who is good.

There does exist a praise-worthy, truly palm-worthy king.

You know, our world exalts people for all sorts of really pathetic reasons: the way they look, the way they talk, the promises they make.

The world is full of people who don't deserve the praise they get.

Now, as good citizens, we honor the **positions** they hold.

As Christians, we love our leaders, even those with whom we disagree. We actually seek to love them into God's Kingdom.

But they're not truly praise-worthy; not one of them is.

In many nations around the world today, you see pictures of their kings — pictures of their presidents and prime-ministers and mullahs: huge pictures, five stories high, painted on the sides of their buildings.

You notice, though, that you don't really see that in nations with Christian roots, because the witness of Scripture tells us that mere people are not praise-worthy.

Our kings — our leaders — really are not palm-worthy people.

But there is One who is.

He's the King who sacrificed Himself.

He's the King who humbled Himself —

who took on the nature of a servant —

who made Himself nothing —

so that those who would follow Him could have everything.

He's the king who became obedient to death — the Kernel of Wheat who died, so that His people might have life.

That's the King who is worthy of the palm.

And the crowd on the Jerusalem Road there started His exaltation, but that's not where it ends. Their display of praise was only the beginning.

The apostle Paul tells us how, after that, God the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name, that at Jesus' name, every knee will bow:

every human knee,

every King's knee,

every congressman's knee,

every pope's knee,

every church and business leader's knee.

They're all going to bow.

And every tongue is going to confess that Jesus is Lord!

Jesus is King!

Jesus is the one who is truly worthy of the palm!

And that kind of praise is going to go on forever and ever. Even in the halls of Heaven, the angels will sing: **"Worthy is the lamb who was slain — to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"**

If you know this Jesus, or if you'll receive Him today as your savior, you and I, we'll praise Him with the angels one day.

But in the meantime, we can praise Him here on earth.

Don't invest yourself — don't give your soul away to lesser kings.

And don't despair of corrupt earthly kings, whoever or wherever they are today.

We have a better King, a truly good King, a King worthy of the palm, whose Kingdom is already here, and who is coming back one day soon to reign.

Turn off the news of the world this morning, and listen to the news of Heaven — and keep your eyes on Jesus, because He's here, He's real, and He's the one King who really, really matters.

Closing Hymn: *Joy to the World*

You may take the palm branches home and attach them to your door as a witness to the world of the king you serve.

Benediction: *Psalm 67*

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us —

² so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.

³ May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

⁴ May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.

⁵ May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.

⁶ The land yields its harvest;
God, our God, blesses us.

⁷ May God bless us still,
so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.