

The Triumphal Entry

Mark 11:1-11

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It seems as if everything is working out perfectly as Jesus approaches Jerusalem.

- Jesus comes with 12 disciples, a striking parallel that must have reminded people of the 12 tribes of Israel. Israel is literally being re-formed.
- Jesus comes as one who has been proclaimed to be the Messiah, the anointed one who would be a savior for Israel.
- Jesus comes at the Passover, that great celebration in the life of Israel when they recalled that God raised a deliverer who led them in triumph over their enemies.

The events that bring us together this morning on what we now call Palm Sunday serve as a witness that God is in complete control of all these glorious happenings. Jesus gives detailed instructions about entering a village, telling two of his disciples just as you enter the village, you will find a colt tied there. Somehow Jesus knows that the colt has never been ridden before. Jesus tells the disciples to untie the colt. And, if anyone asks why you are doing this, just let them know “The Lord needs it.” The disciples go, the disciples find, the disciples untie, and when asked the disciples answer. Guess what? It all works out perfectly.

When they bring the colt, Jesus sits on the colt. The sense that everything is working out perfectly is amplified in the gospels of Matthew and John, where they draw our attention to a prophecy from the Old Testament, a prophecy found in Zechariah chapter nine, where the promise is made to an expectant and hopeful Israel. “Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9) The prophet said there would be shouting, and shouting there was on Palm Sunday.

“Hosanna!” they cried.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” they cried.

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” they cried.

They cried, “Hosanna in the highest!”

It seems as if everything is working out perfectly as Jesus approaches Jerusalem. The king is coming. And it seems the king is coming at just the right time.

Isn't that how God does things, at just the right time?

At just the right time, God spoke into the chaos of the cosmos.

At just the right time God said, "Let there be light."

For each of the days of creation, at just the right time, God spoke and things wondrous and beautiful came into being, heavens and earth, stars and moons, mountains and valleys, rivers and oceans, birds to fill the skies and fish to swim the seas and at just the right time, God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness..."

So at just the right time God created us, male and female he created us, and blessed us.

How do we know it was all at just the right time? Each step of the way, each day of creation, is marked by God's affirmation that it was good. And then at just the right time God rested.

At just the right time God tapped a guy named Noah on the shoulder and said, get busy and build an ark, the floods are coming. Noah got right to work and at just the right time he sealed that ark and it set to floating on the rising tide. A remnant was spared and the history of salvation moved forward.

At just the right time God called Abram to leave his father's land and go to a new land, where God would use Abram and his wife Sarai to form a new people, a people of covenant, a people of blessing. The story of Abram and Sarai is a vivid example of how God's time often doesn't seem like our time. Choosing an old couple who have not had any success at having babies to be the father and mother of a mighty nation, you think God might have done better to call them when they were spring chickens. But at just the right time, when Abraham was near a hundred and Sarah was past the age of ninety, the child of laughter, the child named Isaac was born to them. And talk about at just the right time, there was that dreadful day when Abraham and Isaac were high on Mount Moriah, and Isaac was bound to the altar and Abraham had raised the knife. At the last possible second, when disaster seemed imminent, a ram appeared in the bush and Isaac was spared. God provided a ram for the sacrifice, and with a huge sigh of relief God saved the day...at just the right time.

The mother of Moses pushed her helpless baby boy out among the reeds that lined the banks of the River Nile, praying and hoping God would rescue the baby boy named Moses. At just the right time Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe. She rescued Moses and he became like a son to her.

- At just the right time God spoke to Moses from the burning bush.
- At just the right time the mighty wind blew the waters of the Red Sea apart and Israel marched out of their hundreds of years of bondage and slavery as a free people, right through the heart of the Red Sea.
- At just the right time God gave water in the desert, manna from heaven, commandments from Mount Sinai, and at just the right time Israel crossed the Jordan and made their home in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

So when God's Beloved Son enters this world, we are ready for more of the same.

Matthew tells us there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile, and fourteen generations from the exile to the birth of Jesus. He might as well have said, "At just the right time Mary gave birth to Jesus." At just the right time a star appeared in the East and wise kings followed the star to Bethlehem, where at just the right time Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

At just the right time Jesus jumped in the Jordan River and at just the right time heaven opened, the Holy Spirit as a dove descended on him, and at just the right time God said, "You are my Beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."

Think of how the gospel unfolds. Fishermen leave their nets, tax collectors leave their tax booth, lepers come to Jesus, the blind come to Jesus, the ones who are paralyzed come to Jesus, sinners come to Jesus, even those possessed by evil spirits come to Jesus, and as he heals and sets free and restores for each and every one it must have seemed that Jesus came at just the right time. When the disciples were tossed by the wind and waves while they were on a boat way out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus came to them at just the right time.

So now, after so many signs and so many wonders and so many healings and so much hope and such great expectation when Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, the foal of a colt, and as people shout and raise palm branches and clamor to acclaim him king, it feels like it is just the right time for Jesus to establish his throne and inaugurate his kingdom.

The parade on Palm Sunday does not disappoint. Most of what happens the first days in Jerusalem that first Holy Week does not disappoint. When Jesus takes the bread and the cup of the Passover Meal even the words about his body being broken and his blood poured out are veiled in such a way that maybe all his disciples heard was the promise of forgiveness and the hope of deliverance from their Roman lords.

And maybe as the events unfolded that were so terrible, the words of Jesus that one of them would betray him, that Peter would deny him, the scene in the garden where Jesus was arrested, the trial where he was accused, the soldiers who mocked him as they dressed him in a purple robe and put a crown of thorns on his head, as they struck him on the head with their staff and spit on him, maybe through it all, the disciples held out hope that God would rescue Jesus at just the right time.

When would that right time be?

- When Simon of Cyrene carried the cross of Jesus up the hill to the place called Golgotha?
- When those passing by hurled insults as Jesus hung on the cross?
- When the chief priests and teachers of the law mocked him by saying, “He saved others but he can’t save himself?”
- When at the sixth hour, right in the middle of the day, the sky turned to a black darkness that lasted for three whole hours?
- The end was getting near. Jesus was dying. When would it be “Just the right time?”
- When they filled a sponge with wine vinegar and offered it to Jesus to drink?
- When Jesus let out a loud cry and breathed his last?
- When the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom?

Can we even begin to imagine the utter despair that gripped the disciples and the women who followed and Simon who carried the cross and Joseph of Arimathea who placed the dead body in the tomb? God had so many opportunities, so many times that would have been the right time...and yet Holy Week comes to an abrupt end as Jesus dies on the cross and is buried in a tomb.

The fact that God missed the opportunity to save Jesus at just the right time might lead us to expect that the rest of the story that is told in the bible would be a long apology. Can you imagine God trying to explain how he showed up in the Garden of Gethsemane but he was a few minutes late, Jesus had already been arrested, and he had an emergency out in some far off region of the galaxy while the soldiers were taunting Jesus, and by the time he arrived at the trial he had been convicted and then when the sky turned black he couldn’t find Jesus to rescue him and before you know it the moment had passed. I wanted to be there for him, but it just wasn’t the right time.

You might expect the rest of the pages of the bible to be a long apology from God about not being there for Jesus at just the right time. But if that is your expectation you will be disappointed. In fact, when the early church looked back at the death of Jesus, they didn't say God missed the chance to rescue Jesus at just the right time. Instead, when the Apostle Paul writes about that moment on the cross, he says it happened at just the right time. His powerful words are found in Romans 5. "At just the right time, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6) The death of Jesus was not a mistake. The death of Jesus was not an accident. The death of Jesus was not a failure. The death of Jesus was a marvelous, mysterious, and miraculous gift given by God the Father and Jesus the Beloved Son, given for human beings. His death was at just the right time. And most importantly for us, his death was for us. As Jesus said during the third time he predicted his passion, the third time he said he would die, Jesus said his death was a ransom. On the cross a price was paid. On the cross a debt was covered. On the cross sin was forgiven. On the cross there was an act of redemption. Something was bought back at a great price. What was bought back was life for you and me. The great price was the death of Jesus.

But we would not be able to say he died at just the right time, if something else did not happen at just the right time. For a long three days it felt like God missed his chance to rescue Jesus at just the right time. But on that third day, when the women came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, the dead body of Jesus, they were greeted by the great good news that at just the right time God raised Jesus from the dead.

Can you imagine if God did not wait until just the right time where we might be now? What if God intervened in the Garden of Gethsemane, or at the trial before Pilate, or when Jesus was mocked and scorned, crowned with thorns and spit upon with disdain. What if Jesus had been rescued from the cross right before he died? If Jesus had been made king in Jerusalem that first holy week, we might have a whole crew of disciples still bickering, still having the same petty arguments about who is greatest and the same petty jealousies about who gets to sit on the right and the left. We might have a whole world of disciples who all want to be great.

But because God waited until just the right time, because Jesus died at just the right time, because Jesus gave his life as a ransom at just the right time, there are communities of people gathered 2,000 years later who instead of grasping after greatness, spend their lives bowing down in their hearts and bowing down on their knees because Jesus not only talked the talk, he walked the walk. He did not come to be served, but to be the servant of all. And he served us best when he gave his life as a ransom.

Because Jesus died for us at just the right time, his words to his followers that we should take up our cross and follow him have compelled countless people to seek to serve, to seek to love, to seek to practice kindness and compassion, to explore what it means to lay down their lives for others. Followers of Jesus do this not because he was crowned as the king one day in Jerusalem. Followers of Jesus do this because after he died at just the right time God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in glory. Followers of Jesus do this because he is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and he shall reign forever and ever.

Because Jesus died at just the right time, 7,000 high school students went on a youth mission trip to Mexicali, Mexico in the spring of 1994. They knew the Jesus who walked the walk, becoming a servant, and they wanted to try to follow him. The 30 high school students from our church were assigned a village that was built on top of a garbage dump. It was a terrible place for people to live, but families who were desperate for a place to live settled on top of that garbage dump. We went into that village, and although it was smelly and dirty, the families that lived there had a deep faith and an unwavering commitment to make the best of the life they had. Knowing that 7,000 high school students would go on a mission to places that were filled with poverty, that these 7,000 students would live in tents while they were on the mission and work long days in the hot sun and then sleep in those tents with outhouses as their restrooms, that says something about who Jesus was and who Jesus is. People follow that kind of a king, a king who lays down his life. People look for ways they can lay down their life for others. High school students go on mission trips. And surprisingly, or maybe not surprisingly if you have ever had the experience, these trips are not times for grumbling and complaining. These trips are often times of great joy and celebration and beauty and blessing. It turns out the only parade for Jesus was not just when he came to Jerusalem on a donkey. People form parades that go to places of poverty, they form parades to take dinner to the Warm Center, they form parades to take a ton of food to Jonnycake, they form parades to visit shut-ins, they form parades to travel to Houston to hurricane recovery work, and as they form these parades they lift up the name of Jesus in praise and adoration because Jesus went all the way to the cross. They lift up the name of Jesus because at just the right time he died for us. The joy that comes from serving that kind of a king is inspiring.

On our way home from that trip to Mexicali, Mexico our team stopped at a church in Redondo Beach, California and we gathered in the basement of the church. We were going to spend the night on the floor of that church before we headed home. Sleeping bags were spread out. Dinner was served. We broke up in small groups for a time of reflection and sharing. Tears flowed. Laughter rang out. Commitments were made. One of the songs we sang that week on our mission trip had the chorus, "I choose to follow Jesus...hey hey...I choose to follow the Lord." Kids were choosing to follow Jesus, the Jesus who entered Jerusalem and at just the right time climbed the hill called Calvary where he died on the cross. They sang about choosing to follow this king and to be servants in his kingdom.

After dinner, after the devotions, there was some free time. Kids scattered in groups to walk on the beach or go get ice cream. I hung around in the basement of that church with one of our youth leaders. Her name is Patsy. Patsy has an incredible love for kids. I guess every church has a Patsy, or a Pat, who just loves kids and wants them to know this Jesus who gave his life at just the right time. Patsy and I were basking in the glow of this wonderful week, where we had witnessed kids finding joy as they served in a village built right on top of a dump. They found joy as they gave their lives as servants of Jesus Christ.

There was a piano in that church basement. A few kids were milling around, getting ready to go out and have some well deserved fun, and as they lingered they did what every kid in every church basement with every piano has done, at least as long as I have worked with kids. They came over to the piano and they started playing a song. The song they played, the song that every kid plays on every piano in every church basement is the song *Heart and Soul*. Da da da, da da da da da da...Patsy and I had been on a hundred youth trips and heard that song a hundred times. We smiled. They kept playing. I don't know which one of us thought of it first, but one of us remembered a scene from a movie popular in the 80's. The movie was *Big*, starring Tom Hanks, and at one point there is a giant keyboard and Tom Hanks jumps on the keyboard and starts stepping on the keys that play the tune to *Heart and Soul*.

The kids kept playing. Patsy and I couldn't take it any longer. We got up and we pretended we were on the keyboard, hopping and jumping and landing and skipping and having an absolute blast. It wasn't a parade, but it was certainly a celebration. We didn't have palm branches, but our hearts were full of joy, full of happiness, full of hope.

Looking back on a day like Palm Sunday, if people shouted Hosanna when they thought Jesus was just going to be the king in Jerusalem, what kind of parade should we have now that we know he is King of all kings, and Lord of all lords? What kind of a celebration should we have now that we know that at just the right time he gave his life for us? What kind of a celebration should we have as we enter Holy Week knowing that not only will Jesus die...at just the right time...but at just the right time God will raise him from the dead, triumphant, victorious, and exalted to the highest place.

Knowing all these things, may today be our day to shout "Hosanna!"

May today be our day to cry out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

May today be our day to wave the branches as we sing our songs of praise, "Hosanna in the highest!"