

²⁸After Jesus had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹As he came near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ahead, ³⁰saying, “Go to the village ahead of you. When you enter it, you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹And if anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you will say this: ‘The Lord needs it.’”

³²Those who were sent ahead went and found things just as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.”

³⁵Then they brought the colt to Jesus. They threw their robes on the colt and set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he went along, people spread their robes on the road. ³⁷As he was approaching the slope of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began to praise God joyfully, with a loud voice, for all the miracles they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

³⁹Some of the Pharisees from the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

⁴⁰He replied, “I tell you, if these people would be silent, the stones would cry out.”

It’s been a tradition in my family, like many families, to stay up on New Year’s Eve and watch the ball drop in Times Square on TV. All my dad’s family would crowd into my grandparents’ house and spend the evening leading up to midnight eating all kinds of snacks and playing all kinds of games. Then midnight would come in New York. We’d count down with the TV and the million people gathered on that one street in New York City until zero. We’d listen to Sinatra’s “New York, New York” as people danced and couples kissed. But that was just the warmup. Since we were in central time, we had another hour to wait. That’s when the party moved outside and my dad, my uncle, and my grandpa started lighting fireworks. When midnight finally came, from my grandparents’ front porch, we’d all join together in a chorus of Auld Lang Syne. New Year’s Eve holds many of my favorite memories as a child. It was an evening of excitement. It was an evening of glory.

I always thought it would be the coolest experience to be there on New Year’s Eve and take in the excitement of that spectacle seen around the world. But a few years ago, my friend and his wife went. And his experience was not what I would have imagined. You see, if you want to stand in Times Square to see the ball drop, you have to get there many hours early. And there’s nowhere to sit or use the bathroom. If you move, your spot is lost. So, for ten plus hours, you just stand there, waiting to celebrate for a few minutes, then make your way home through busy roads and busier subway lines.

Sometimes, what we see is different from reality. In the case of Times Square, I saw this illustrious celebration of pure joy. But for those standing on the streets of New York with sore backs and hungry stomachs, the experience was less. On Palm Sunday we see the opposite. We see a scene of humility, especially when we take in what’s about to happen. But this scene of surrender really becomes a canvas of conquer. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to do what needs to be done, but it’s not what the people think needs to be done.

This day carries so much imagery of victory. Jesus enters into David’s royal city as the king of not just Jerusalem or Israel, but the entire world. The Lord sends an envoy into the city to prepare his Passover feast. He does not walk into Jerusalem like a peasant, but rides like a noble. The crowds cheer his coming, spreading their robes on the ground and laying palm branches at his feet, a symbol of a victor coming home from war. And their shouts are shouts for a conqueror: “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Even his enemies are aggrieved. They want the celebrating to stop. This all speaks to a king winning.

But maybe we're seeing the glory through the humiliation. Maybe we're missing the fact that this isn't as awesome as we first think. Jesus does not go to celebrate the Passover as a guest in the house of a religious leader or a government official. He rents a space to have a muted supper with only his closest disciples. Jesus does not ride on the back of a white stallion. He rides on a donkey colt, the beast of burden. It's not the high society folks that welcome him into the city, but the common people of Jerusalem, the people with little sway in society. And the people who are opposing him? Well, these are the movers and shakers of society. Jesus is not entering in as the universally agreed upon King of the Jews. In fact, many will threaten Pilot to walk back that statement five days later.

Jesus' march into Jerusalem is not the sight of splendor we might imagine at first glance, but there is something even worse. He will not leave Jerusalem until he has suffered. He's going to be turned against, first by one of the twelve, then by many who have begun following him. He's going to be arrested, treated as a dangerous man by his very own people. He's going to be paraded around to one kangaroo court after another, so that everyone can get their pound of flesh and prove themselves as a political ally to all the right people, finally being found guilty of crimes he was not guilty of. He's going to be beaten, have thorns jammed into his head, be spit on, be forced to carry the object that would torture him, and then be tacked to that torture machine. Finally, he's going to die.

How empty this march! What an ill-thought-out idea to ride the colt up to the city of death! What wasted opportunity getting robes all dirty and stained to line the path of the rebel! What short-sighted words to praise the criminal! How many who speak "blessed" this Sunday at the Mount of Olives will speak "crucify" just days later at the top of the hill? How many will deny that they were even on the mountainside that day?

How can we march the children up to the front of church at the beginning of the service today to commemorate that day? Are we too dull to notice this is a march of surrender? Are we so shortsighted that we completely forget what happens on Thursday and Friday? Who is this ruined man that you come to worship?

Jesus goes to surrender. Sin must be paid, and he's the only one who can do it. God's path to crush the devil's head runs through this road to Jerusalem. It runs through the betrayal and the crooked courts. It runs through every mark of abuse on his body and the punishment of wood he was nailed to. But Jesus is not surrendering to sin or Satan. He's surrendering to the will of God. Because as he lays down his life willingly, a voluntary surrender, he also conquers by accomplishing everything he came to do.

There are many seeming contradictions in the poetic picture language of Scripture. Last week we heard Paul talking about finding his strength in God through the weakness of his flesh. We hear in the Bible about finding true freedom by binding ourselves as slaves to God's will. Today we get another. Jesus surrenders in order to conquer.

God's requirement for the payment of sin is a spotless sacrifice. Jesus is the only spotless man who has ever walked this earth, the only one without sin who could make the sacrifice to destroy sin. And his sacrifice wins the victory. It wins the victory over Satan, as the devil watches his triumph topple in defeat. How blindsided he must have been when he gets Jesus to the cross, only to find out this was God's plan to rescue the world! It wins the victory over sin, as this sacrifice covers over all of them, a sacrifice for sins of past, present, and even future. And it wins the victory over death and hell, as his suffering is the key that opens eternity.

This seeming contradiction even shows itself in the events of this section. Sure, Jesus sends disciples to set up a low-profile Passover meal. But who could know what they would find and who they would meet in the city unless he was the knower of all things? Sure, Jesus rides the donkey. But this is an unriden donkey. It hasn't been broken for a rider yet. Jesus is no horse whisperer. He's the everlasting word of God, the one who created

all things, this donkey included. How can it not bend to the will of its creator? Sure, those who welcome him into the city are the lowly and poor. But in God's kingdom, where the first will be last and the last will be first, these are the important lords and ladies. And the Heavenly King frees them from their slavery under the Prince of Darkness to live and to rule in his kingdom. And sure, Jesus' enemies have power and authority in society, enough to completely sway society away from Jesus in the matter of a week, but his enemies could not keep him buried and they could not keep his message of free grace from spreading to every corner of the globe. This is not merely a man walking to his execution. This is God in man going to do the unthinkable, the ultimate trade of his perfection for all sinners' imperfections.

As you stand on the mountainside to welcome Jesus into the city in commemoration for the worst and greatest week in all of history, understand the paradox. What looks like weakness to the world is the strength of the Almighty. What looks like humiliation is the most glorious sight we've seen yet. And what looks like death is the source of life everlasting. So, spread your coats in the road for him. Honor him this week and every week with everything that you have and everything that you are. Cut palm branches to line his path, as you celebrate the fact that the war is over. Shout with your hearts and voices and everything in you: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Because this week you'll see peace in heaven and glory in the highest. Amen.