

On Palm Sunday we remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the beginning of what we often call “holy week.” This account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is one of the few stories covered in each of the four Gospels (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19). This was an event that made an impression on the disciples accompanying Jesus.

Jesus and his followers were among many people traveling to Jerusalem at that time of the year. Many Jews traveled to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate the Passover. It was an annual pilgrimage when Jerusalem would swell with pilgrims. It was a tradition for these pilgrims to walk into Jerusalem as a symbol of humility and respect. Even if someone traveled a great distance on an animal, the worshippers would customarily enter Jerusalem on foot. Jesus did the opposite. Mark 10 seems to indicate that Jesus had been traveling by foot but chose to finish the journey on a donkey. In fact, this is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus is described as riding on an animal.

Jesus of Nazareth had now become notable person. His disciples already understood that he was the Messiah and many others were hoping it was true. As Jesus entered the city, numerous people met him with shouts of Hosanna (meaning “save us”). In a gesture of honor, they laid their garments and palm leaves down on the road for his donkey to walk upon (rather than the dirty, dusty road). While riding a donkey over leaves and jackets may not seem that exciting or desirable to us, in the Jewish context this was the royal treatment. In Psalm 118:27 palm leaves are seen as being used in great processions, especially those connected to the coming of the Lord. King Solomon rode into his coronation ceremony in Jerusalem on a mule in 1 Kings 1:44. When Jehu was pronounced king in 2 Kings 9:13, the people offered their garments to cover the road where Jehu traveled. Indeed, some of those following Jesus would have preferred to see him ride into Jerusalem on a warhorse but they were glad to see him riding into Jerusalem in the style of great kings of the past.

The gospel writers indicate that this event was a fulfillment of prophecy given in Zechariah 9:9. However, fulfilling prophecy was most likely of secondary concern. Prophecy is not a set of demands that must be fulfilled in the future. Prophecy is expressing the will and mind of God, whether present or future. This prophecy was not a mandate for Jesus. Jesus did not look back into the prophets to see what he must do. Rather, the prophets saw (by the grace of God) ahead to those things that Jesus would do. The prophet Zechariah foresaw what Jesus himself would decide to do. Thus, riding the donkey into Jerusalem was not an obligation from the prophet, it was the determination of Jesus. Jesus determined to do this.

Why? Why would Jesus, who was the greatest example of humility, intentionally enter Jerusalem in this exalted way? It could not have been about his ego or flaunting his status. Jesus repeatedly told people to NOT disclose who he was and refused to be made a political king (John 6:15). I think there were two primary reasons for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem on the donkey. First, it was to confirm to his followers and those residing in Jerusalem that he was the prophesied King and Messiah. His arrival into Jerusalem, especially this particular trip, was significant since his actions identified him as the Messiah and eternal king from the line of David.

Second, this was a foreshadowing of the glory that would be experienced on the other side of the week ahead. Jesus knew what he was going into. This was not just a Passover pilgrimage. This was a journey to the cross. Yet before all the suffering started, here was a moment of glory for Jesus and his followers to enjoy. They were excited. Mark tells us that Bartimaeus, who had been healed from blindness, was in the crowd. Most likely he was sharing his testimony. John tells us that those who saw

Lazarus raised from death were in the crowd telling the story. Perhaps it was these men, with their savior riding triumphantly into Jerusalem for many to see, who led in the praise cheering “Hosanna!” It was a glorious moment and the perfect way to start a holy week. They were celebrating the coming of Jesus.

Later, however, in the midst of betrayal, trials, torture, and death the disciples and followers of Jesus may have been tempted to look at their situation and say, “this is not a holy week, and perhaps he is not the Messiah.” Yet before they had the opportunity to doubt, God provided them with the opportunity to believe. The image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem with glory and praise while fulfilling scripture perhaps stirred or strengthened the faith of those who watched. Unfortunately, in John 12:16, John recalled that the disciples really did not understand what Jesus was doing. It was only in hindsight that they were able to put everything together. However, they did not have to wait until the crisis was over on Easter Sunday to find reason to believe and trust God. There had already been given to them confirmation and reason to trust in Jesus on Palm Sunday.

From Palm Sunday to Resurrection morning, the Jesus and the disciples found themselves in both a holy week and a tumultuous crisis. Jesus took up the cross while the disciples scattered and despaired. While they gladly followed Jesus as he rode triumphant on a donkey, they failed to follow as he carried a cross. They were pleased to walk alongside him down avenues of palm leaves and soft garments yet were scarce by his side down the path of tears and blood. The disciples were happy to stand with Jesus when the crowds used their hands to applaud and worship Jesus. They fell away, however, those the mob’s hands were used to beat and crucify Jesus.

The truth is that walking with Jesus will include many days that resemble Palm Sunday but also many days that resemble Good Friday. The key here is not to squander the days of glory but use them to strengthen our faith for the days of hardship ahead. Not every day is a triumphant walk in glory. Difficult days do arise for the believer. In those hard times, fragile faith and weak trust may not endure. Suffering may cause us to waver in our belief. Fear, doubt, and temptation may increase alongside troubles. Let us remember, God has given us reason to believe. Surely, we can recall even recent moments of glory where God was powerfully made known. Don’t allow a recent glorious testimony to be diminished by a recent crisis. We don’t have to wait until the crisis is over to praise and trust God. We can do it even now based on what he has already accomplished and shown us.

As the disciples entered holy week, Jesus knew they would be tested along with him. Perhaps Palm Sunday was designed to be a lens through which the rest of the week should be viewed. As they saw Jesus struggling up the path to calvary with a cross on his back, they would have done well to remember his glorious entry and then view his present suffering through the lens of their prophesied king riding gloriously into Jerusalem for that very purpose. The journey to the cross was a necessary extension of the procession that started on Palm Sunday. His suffering was a confirmation of his identity, not a negation of it.

The lens of faith is the lens through which God intends for us to see the world. We do not look through rose-colored glasses. We do not deny the reality of the suffering. We put it into the proper perspective. Likewise, we should view any crisis through the lens of the victory that Jesus won this week against sin and death. The victory of Jesus gives us the confidence to trust in God in spite of what we see. In fact, Jesus was more triumphant on Good Friday than he was on Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday was a foretaste of the glory that Good Friday ultimately provides.