

CELEBRATE THE KING OF PEACE

“Rejoice greatly... your king comes to you.” That might have been a reason for a ticker tape parade 2,500 years ago. But why would we in the 21st century rejoice over a king? We did away with kings a long time ago. Kings were the problem! Surely those were different times!

But God’s Word says, **“Rejoice greatly... your king comes to you.”** Well, under what circumstances could you imagine rejoicing over a king. Whichever side of the aisle is yours, fear of someone acting like a monarch is one of the knee-jerk fears voiced whenever a president we didn’t vote for gets into office. So could you ever rejoice over a king? Hmm. I’d have to think about that for a while. Perhaps you really can’t imagine a time when a king would be a good thing.

Well, let’s imagine this. For hundreds of years you were a sovereign nation, ruled by your own kings. Kings who were like you, who thought like you, who to varying degrees worshiped the same God you worshiped, who lived pretty much in the same area you lived. Their children married, well, maybe not into your family, but families you knew.

Then foreigners came. A far-off people of strange language, strange customs, strange religion, who were nothing like you, who viewed your people as people to be conquered and enslaved. They forcibly moved your people off your land. At a time like that, wouldn’t you love to have your own king back?

That was God’s people in Zechariah. For 70 years Israel had had no king because they had been ruled by foreigners: Babylonians and Persians. But the fire of freedom always burns in the hearts of those who have tasted it. Israel looked for the day when their own king would return.

Maybe in those circumstances I could imagine being glad to hear: **“Rejoice greatly... your king comes to you.”** That is what Jesus promised.

I. Celebrate the Coming King

This king God promised, what a king! **“See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey.”** If you have to have a king, this is the king you want.

He is **“righteous.”** Have you ever lamented “politics as usual”? All the back-handers and backscratching. The preferential treatment of well-connected people – how certain people never feel the full force of the law, and others always win the lucrative bids and favorable legislation. It cues you in to the truth that any political arrangement on this earth is doomed to corruption—whether monarchy or democracy. It has never been any different, and never will be! But the king the LORD promises through Zechariah is a **“righteous”** king. There *will be* justice. He will rule with justice which no person can bend to preferential treatment.

He will bring **“salvation.”** The most natural expectation of salvation in a king would be victory against outside forces. Who does not want freedom, salvation from outside forces?

He will be **“gentle.”** Even though he is a king, he does not look down his nose when his subjects stand before him. This king does not worry that the riffraff might dirty him. Quite the opposite, he is concerned about all his people. And here, if we had to look over the 44 presidents of our nation, who would you mention as the most humble and gentle? Perhaps Abraham Lincoln comes to mind. Maybe you have heard of his famous, personal letter to console a mother who had lost five sons to the Civil War. A king with such a heart is not like any of the caricatures of kings we have been taught. Yes, a gentle king would be the right kind of king.

His humility and gentleness would be shown as he comes **“riding a donkey.”** Donkeys were not proud charging war-horses, but they were, in that time, what most people used. Riding a donkey, again, showed his willingness to associate with and understand his people.

If such a righteous, victorious, gentle and humble king comes as your ruler – if such a ruler were possible in this fallen world, would we not be glad to have such a king? So Zechariah, God’s prophet, tells the people of Israel, **“When you see this king, Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!”** Shout! Celebrate! Play the music, sing the songs. Sing songs to him like we did at the start of this service.

This ideal king was God’s ideal for all of Israel’s kings. Now this was something mentioned in some detail in a recent Wednesday evening Lenten service, so I will only briefly touch on it here. In the Old Testament, nearly every single law that God made for his people was a picture of what would be a reality in Jesus Christ. For example: the animal sacrifices for sin were pictures of the future Savior who would make a one-time sacrifice for sin. So too, the Old Testament ideal king of Israel was a picture of the Messiah who would rule and protect God’s people.

This passage from Zechariah about the king was a well-known passage to Jews even before Palm Sunday happened. Even in Jesus’ day, the Jewish teachers taught that this passage in Zechariah was a prophecy of the Messiah. So indicative of the Messiah was this passage, that one popular belief held that, “if anyone saw [a donkey] in his dream, he

will see salvation.”¹ Which is kind of strange, but it tells us that all Israel was watching expectantly for this person in Zechariah chapter 9. And along comes Jesus on Palm Sunday!

Jesus knew all this about Zechariah chapter 9, and that is why on Palm Sunday, Jesus acted so strangely. “Strange?” you ask. Think about it. Jesus told his disciples to go get someone else’s donkey. Now I am not saying that Jesus was stealing it or anything like that. (Only people with an over-developed sense of private property could accuse him of that.) But when else in the Gospels did Jesus ever request something belonging to someone else? This was strange because this is the only time that we hear that Jesus rode a beast of burden. Strange because Jesus usually told people to keep quiet about him, but Palm Sunday is the one time he lets them shout for all the world to hear.

You see, it wasn’t coincidence. Zechariah’s words were a prophecy of Jesus. And Jesus consciously went out of his way to fulfill these words from Zechariah. Jesus knew that when the people saw him in this way, they would recognize him as the promised Messiah. It is all part of God’s big and beautiful plan spanning centuries and millenia, with all the markers pointing to Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior. Celebrate your King!

II. Celebrate the Peace Bringer

Verse 10 further describes this king. ***“I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations.”*** When God’s Messiah would come, he would destroy all the implements of war: breaking the battle bows, removing chariots and horses. He would establish peace.

Looking at Zechariah 9:10 and then looking at Palm Sunday we learn an important lesson. It is a warning about hearing what we want to hear.

Every one of us falls into the trap of hearing what we want to hear. It is the great danger of internet rumors. You get an message or email that tells you everything you had ever suspected about a person(s) whom you don’t like. It proves what a scoundrel that person is. So you forward the email to everyone you know. “Look, everything I said about this person is true!” It turns out to be a hoax. And you feel like a fool, and in fact you were for assuming the worst and spreading slander. If you had just stopped to think, you would have realized the untruth of it all. You realize that you believed it because it told you *what you wanted* to hear about that person.

Our reading from Zechariah was two verses. Both verses prophesy God’s promised king. But it seems that the crowds only quoted the first verse on Palm Sunday. The oppressed Jewish nation wanted a king. They wanted a victorious king. They wanted a righteous king. They wanted a king who would prove everyone else wrong. In Zechariah 9:9 they heard what they wanted to hear. But verse 10, not so much. Verse 10 speaks of a king of peace.

Which may seem kind of nit-picky. Except listen to these words from the Gospel of Luke which also recorded the events of Palm Sunday. Jesus approached Jerusalem. The people praised him, quoting verse 9 about the victorious king, but not verse 10 about the peaceful king, and then Jesus says, *“If you [Jerusalem] had only known on this day what will bring you peace...”* They did not know what would bring them peace with God. The crowds around Jesus on Palm Sunday acclaimed him as king. And rightly so! He looked just like God’s picture of the promised Messiah looked in Zechariah 9. He was humble. He was righteous. He was even riding a donkey! He looked “David’s greater Son” as one of our hymns puts it. But they heard what they wanted to hear. They didn’t want him as a peace-bringer. They wanted a king who would settle the problems of their lives in this here-and-now world. They did not care so much for a bringer of spiritual peace.

Oh, how many Christians these days fall into that! They praise Jesus for what they want to hear from, and find in Jesus, rather than listening to Jesus himself speak of how he has brought spiritual peace.

Many listen to false prophets who center all of people’s hopes on material well-being, on business success, on the house of their dreams, the coveted car. *“If you had only know what would bring you peace.”*

Many focus on a Savior who comes with an earthly rule of a thousand years on this earth! But time and again Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world. Again he says, *“If you had only know what would bring you peace.”*

How many want a feel-good religion that doesn’t worry them with talk about death and sin and punishment! They just want an elixir of positive thinking that helps you chase out down feelings. *“If you had only know what would bring you peace.”*

Zechariah prophesied a king of peace. This is what the angels sang about when they announced Jesus birth, *“Peace on earth to men on whom his favor rests.”* Not peace among us, but peace from God to us.

This was the peace Jesus promised to his disciples: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid”* (John 14:27).

This peace is about something bigger than life in this world. *“God was pleased... through [Christ] to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross”* (Col. 1:19-20).

By choosing this moment of Palm Sunday to look like the promised king, Jesus was saying that what would now

¹ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus...*, 1006.

happen is what really makes him king. He chose Palm Sunday, the first day of the week that includes what we now call Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. By choosing this exact time, Jesus was pointing out what he would do in the next seven days was the core of his mission of peace. Not a worldly kingdom, not wealth, not material success. But the payment for our sins. The thing that makes him a righteous, victorious, gentle Savior King who gives us eternal peace.

Celebrate the King who fulfilled all prophecy. Celebrate the peace he brings, he who said, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.*" Amen.

In the New Testament after the Gospels and Acts, there are 22 books of the Bible. Eighteen of them (and you can check this out if you want), eighteen out of 22 begin with “Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” Did you know that? 80% of the time, about the first words of the books of the New Testament is a proclamation of peace. Peace from God to us, given by Jesus Christ.

And that is why a great many pastors start sermons with “Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ,” because that is how the Bible generally greets New Testament Christians.

May this be a lesson in humility to us. As we read and here God’s Word, we need to always ask ourselves, “Do I believe what I believe because this is what God’s word says, or because it is what I want to hear.” You know, preaching sermons are dangerous that way. I pray, and I try as honest and true to God’s Word as I possibly can be. But it has happened to me, more than once, more than a dozen times, that as I have studied the word of God for a given Sunday, I have to sacrifice my opinions on the altar. I have understood a Bible passage, or I had a conviction in my heart, that was different from the word in front of me. And I have to listen to God, to leave my pre-conceived, but wrong idea and embrace God’s new revelation to me.

This is natural. No one can soak up and learn an entire body of knowledge in a day. It happens over time. And so I cannot get upset at sincere committed Christians who do not know as much of God’s Word as I maybe think they should (and I used the words “sincere, committed” because lazy, half-hearted Christians are an entirely different thing.) But I cannot get upset at sincere committed Christians who don’t know as much of God’s Word as I mayb ethink they should, because all of us are in the process of renewing our knowledge of God, of leaving behind faulty conclusions, and learning more and more, just as these disciples of Jesus were in this most holy of weeks learning more about Jesus.

But it has happened once that I can think of, perhaps another time or two, that my wife has said to me, “When you preached on that a few years ago, I thought you said, [such and such] but this time you said [so and so].” That is not a small thing. Oh, the point under discussion may have seemed a small one, but since this is God’s Word, it really isn’t! A

What are your wrong expectations of Jesus? That he lets you do what you want? That he would get with the times? That he would just let you be

and not always have to think about other people? That he would wink at your indiscretions and weaknesses?

But what was it that Jesus was most concerned about?

This is the prophecy of Zechariah. It was God’s prophet speaking to a subjugated people, promising them a freedom they did not have. It was not an emancipation from their Babylonian or Persian overlords in a renewed Israelite monarchy. It was a prophecy of a future king.

I am have no doctorate of political science, and it has been a few decades since my last lecture in World History. But here is something that I am pretty sure is a fact: no significant country or state (or whatever you want to call it) has been established by peace, and no significant country or state has ever maintained its identity through peace.

Which is one of the great paradoxes of humanity. Perhaps our greatest desire in life is to live a peaceful life, not just for us but for all of society. Yet no people can continue to live in peace without at least threat of force, or more often true through human history, the actual execution of war. One of the benefits of our modern availability of information, and a few of you know this because you were there, is that we have become aware of how terrible war is. We have seen the pictures of the victims of war, both the dead, the walking wounded, and the walking dead. And I believe that while it has not gotten rid of the need for military might and muscle, it has made much of humanity a little less willing to get into wars. Too much of that can lead people to become victims. But in a measured dose, a reluctance to get into wars is a good thing.