



GRACE ROAD CHURCH Palm Sunday 2023

We are going to Mark 11 today.

Today we are going to look at what happened on Palm Sunday, which we celebrate today, the day Jesus rode victoriously on a donkey into Jerusalem to kick off holy week. He came in victoriously on this Sunday, was arrested on Thursday, crucified on Friday, and rose again on Sunday.

So this is the biggest week in history.

So we are going to look at Jesus today and the way people responded to Him. And the responses were quite different. They say that the same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay.

And as Jesus rides in to Jerusalem He will be worshiped, but at the same time, this week doesn't culminate with Jesus being celebrated by all but crucified by a mob. So something about Jesus was both inspiring worship in many and hardening others and making them so mad that they wanted to get rid of Jesus.

So we are going to tell, in parallel, the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem as the king, and part of the story of Judas Iscariot, his disciple who became so hardened against Him that he betrayed Him.

When Jesus had called his twelve disciples, he chose 12 men, 11 from the southern part of Israel, and one from the North. The one from the north was Judas Iscariot.

Judas's name was common in their day, so common that one of the other apostles actually had the same name. Jesus chooses twelve guys and two of them are named Judas. There was another Judas among them - Thaddeus was also called Judas, the son of James (it was common to have a couple of names.)

And boys named Judas were likely named after a guy in their history named Judas Maccabaeus. "Maccabaeus" means "hammer" and Judas "the hammer" Maccabaeus was the guy who kicked the Syrians out of Jerusalem, destroyed the statues of greek gods they had set up in the temple, and according to their legend, the menorah in the temple

burned for eight nights even though there was only enough oil left for one. And every year, Jews celebrate that rededication of the temple and the removal of their oppressors from the temple at Hanukkah. So Hannukah is, in part, a celebration of the heroics of Judas Maccabaeus, the “hammer,” who drove out their enemies.

And it says something about the culture in the days of Jesus on earth that so many boys were named Judas. The big hero was the liberator who hammered their enemies. Revolution was in the air in those days. And it’s likely that that kind of Jewish patriotism was in Judas’s blood, and he was raised for it.

And then one day he hears this man Jesus teaching. And Jesus’s teaching is not like anyone else’s, He is speaking with authority. They had been waiting for the Messiah to come and kick out Rome and fix the abuses in the temple. And Jesus seems like a likely prospect to do that - he’s confronting religious leaders and not afraid of anybody.

Then, Jesus calls Judas especially to come and follow Him.

So his expectations were high: I am among the inner circle of the Messiah! I’m going to be part of kicking out Rome. There are going to be holidays celebrated in my honor. I’m going to be rich.

So Judas joins the band of apostles, and it gets crazy fast. They start doing miracles. Jesus sends out the twelve to preach and they come back reporting these amazing things God had done through them. This is the one! This is the king! This, in Judas’s mind, is the next Judas Maccabaeus, his namesake. So being connected to Jesus is going to benefit him.

But at some point, Judas felt he wasn’t benefitting, at least not quickly enough. He had been appointed to be their accountant and keep their offering money, but he was stealing some for Himself¹.

And you could imagine what that might do to someone’s soul, to be stealing from Jesus, but then looking in the eyes of Jesus every day, seeing real miracles, hearing the words ring with authority, and then going right back to your thievery. That would have to harden your heart and corrupt you deeply.

¹ John 12:6

At some point, for Judas, Jesus became desirable because He was useful - for money, for influence, for acclaim, for power. And there were probably waves of home, like on Paul Sunday:

Mark 11:1-7 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'" 4 And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. 5 And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. 7 And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it.

So Jesus is going to make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. So he has two of his disciples go into the village to get an unbroken donkey for him to ride on.

And Jesus knew what He was doing. There was a lot of symbolism packed into this.

In 518 BC, the prophet Zechariah had described the entry of the ultimate king into Jerusalem:

Zechariah 9:9-10 9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Zechariah predicted that when the rightful king came into Jerusalem to rule, he would come on a donkey.

So Jesus sets this whole thing up to paint that picture. He wants to make clear to everyone that He is that king.

It would be like going to Washington, DC with a police motorcade, and black cars, and men on motorcycles with earpieces in and suits on. You're saying something about who you are.

And this would have brought to mind another great king from their history, because when Solomon became King, he rode in on a mule (half donkey, half horse) that belonged to the previous king David. And that's how his rule was established.

1 Kings 1:38 So Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule and brought him to Gihon. 39There Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, "Long live King Solomon!"

So he rides in on a mule, they anoint his head with oil, they celebrate him as king.

And at the time, someone else, a villain named Adonijah, had wrongly claimed the throne. So when Solomon arrived, he kicked him off the throne, but gave him a chance to bow before him and be loyal.

But it wasn't long before Adonijah stepped out of line and Solomon had him killed.

So Solomon rides in on a half donkey and immediately removes the wrong king, soon has him killed, and establishes his rule.

So Jesus riding in on a donkey here creates some expectations - He is riding in like the king who ruled in peace but had no tolerance for his enemies, and many are expecting that He will give Rome - the people wrongly on the throne in Israel - the old Adonijah treatment: bow to the king of the Jews or be destroyed.

And Jesus said he wanted them to get the donkey that nobody had ridden on before (Mark 11:2). And this wasn't because Jesus was a too big of a deal to sit on somebody else's donkey.

This is remarkable, because you don't just hop on a donkey that nobody has ever ridden on and ride it smoothly the first time.

It was an unbroken colt. I once watched someone break a horse that hadn't been ridden before. He would try to sit on it, and it would go nuts. And he wasn't a horse whisperer, he used a whip to get it to comply. I saw the thing roll over him to try to crush him - cause imagine you're a horse and someone just jumps on your back, that would freak you out and you'd be thinking GET IT OFF!

But they bring this unbroken donkey to Jesus.

And Jesus sits. This should have been a rodeo.

But Jesus has dominion over creation. He's a king.

But his reign goes beyond politics. Just a political king can't just sit on an unbroken donkey - imagine Trump or Biden trying that?

It doesn't care who they are - it doesn't say, "Oh, you're a pretty big deal, I'll behave." But Jesus's reign extends beyond politics, even to the natural world. So he sits on it.

This is the Jesus who speaks to a storm and says, "Peace, be still," and it does.

In his lifetime, Jesus has proven he has complete dominion over creation: raising the dead, curing disease, healing a withered hand.

And now he's coming into Jerusalem, in the minds of the Jews' the capital of the world, and he's coming in just like God had said the king would come, on this unbroken colt that is submitting to Him just like winds and waves, and death and demons,,and water that he told to become wine, and disease that He made depart, and, in a week, just like the grave He made open.

So they're excited!

Mark 11:8 And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.

So they lay out their cloaks, like a red carpet treatment for the king. They wave palm branches, and for about 170 years years these had been a nationalist symbol. During that same Maccabean revolt, Simon Maccabeaus, Judas Maccabeus's brother, entered Jerusalem to huge fanfare.

In the non-inspired apocrypha, the historian there describes the scene like this:

1 Maccabees 13:50 Then they (the Syrians in the temple) cried to Simon to make peace with them, and he did so. But he expelled them from there and cleansed the citadel from its pollutions. 51 On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps

and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.

So Palm Branches became a nationalistic symbol. When they celebrated by waving PALM BRANCHES. It was like waving the flag of Israel.

And now they start making some noise by chanting some Psalms:

Mark 1: 9 And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

They're singing what are called the Hallel Psalms². They're Psalms of triumph and victory that celebrate God rescuing his people. The biblical equivalent of we will rock you or we are the champions. They are headed toward the big battle, and the miracles Jesus has been doing guarantee that they are going to win this thing. And the word Hosanna means "save us now," it's a word used in Psalm 118:25

**Psalm 118:25-26 "Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!"
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.**

Jesus is about to be made king. They're praying for Him to be their rescuer

And their enemy, the Roman Empire that was wrongly occupying their territory and with an emperor wrongly sitting on a throne and claiming to reign over Israel, could expect to be removed. Now Jesus is kind, so maybe He'll give them a chance to bow before Him but if they step out of line, it would be just like Adonijah.

So this is going to be a moment of triumph.

But Luke's Gospel records something that the others don't:

Luke 19:41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your

² These include Psalms 113-118.

enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

As Jesus approaches the city, He weeps and predicts the city's doom. The city would be laid siege to and then torn to the ground. And just like Jesus said, In 70 AD, God withdrew His protection from their city, the Roman commander Titus laid siege to the city, and then razed it to the ground.

Knowing this and predicting this, Jesus weeps.

This is one of two places where Jesus is said to have wept, one was at the death of his friend, Lazarus, and the other was on Palm Sunday as he looked out over Jerusalem.

Now pan to Judas. He's coming into the city, with the disciples, there's the donkey and the palm branches and the patriotic hymns. Now is the time for Jesus to rule and reign, and with Him, Judas will rule and reign. He'll get his power and money after all.

But now this king is weeping!

Weeping? There's no weeping in triumphal entries! We have Roman butts to kick.

But he's also saying the city is going to be wiped out. I thought Jesus was the Messiah who would be the one to save the city!

This is not playing out at all as he had hoped when he agreed to follow Jesus 3 years ago.

Jesus's potential usefulness to Judas is drying up.

So fast forward to Thursday. Jesus and his disciples are around a table in the upper room, eating the last supper. Jesus has dressed Himself as a servant, washed their feet, taken bread and said it is His body which will be given for them, and took the cup to tell them it would be spilled for them.

But by then, Judas's heart was already hard and he had already agreed to to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. But still he's there are the supper, and this unfolds:

John 13:21–30

[21] After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” [22] The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. [23] One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side, [24] so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. [25] So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” [26] Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. [27] Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” [28] Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. [29] Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. [30] So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. (ESV)

So Judas goes to find the soldiers, and Judas knew Jesus would go to this Garden of Gethsemane to pray with His disciples because He always went there with them.

And he meets Him outside the garden, and with kisses that appear affectionate, he points Him out to the soldiers who would arrest Him.

Jesus was no longer useful. There would be no more money in it for Judas. So he sells Him for 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave, and cashes out the last little bit he could from Jesus.

And we know Judas is the great betrayer, one of the most evil characters in the Bible. And we think he’s an anomaly.

But it’s common for Christians and people who claim to be Christians to think of Jesus in this way: I will be faithful to Jesus if He meets my expectations.

Jesus is good, we can think, because He is useful. But if He doesn’t meet my expectations: He doesn’t say what I want Him to say about issues, He doesn’t bless me the way I wanted to be blessed, or He doesn’t make with my life what I expected Him to make with my life, then I may very well be out.

I can say to Him, “Save me,” but “from what” and “what salvation looks like” need to be up to me.

But beware of this. Beware of trying to make Jesus what you want him to be:

“He needs to give me the life i want.”

“The spouse i want”

“The family i wanted”

“The career i wanted”

“The answer to prayer I wanted.”

And if Jesus is now who I want Him to be, I'll meet you in Gethsemane with a kiss.

We chuck Jesus and following Him when its hard, unexpected, and when He ceases to be useful. And Judas was wicked and has been paying for His sin ever since. But our hearts can get pretty hard in our bitterness against Him, too.

And we can worship Him as long as He might be useful.

But Jesus is worthy of worship because He is God.

And to miss that is to miss everything.

When Jesus stopped to weep over Jerusalem, there was something about Jerusalem that warranted God's judgment and God's weeping. You might think that to be under judgment and wept over by Jesus they would have to have been horribly immoral, murderous, they all looked like the orcs in Lord of the rings.

But their problem wasn't that they were any more immoral than anyone else, because they weren't. Their culture was heavily influenced by the ten commandments, they valued obedience to God's law. Many of them made efforts toward morality. You could probably make a case that their culture was more moral than ours.

In general they were decent people - they had high moral standards, they had great family values, they valued raising their kids right, they tithed, they were devoted religious people who gave more effort than most people in the world toward obeying the commandments. They were the equivalent of church-going folks. They were good people, good citizens, and good neighbors, as we would typically define those things.

But Jesus didn't commend them for trying, He didn't celebrate the fact that they were religious, He didn't compare them to others and say they're at least relatively good. He wept over their state.

And Jesus says that the reason for their plight was because

Luke 19:44 "they did not know the time of their visitation."

They didn't realize that in Jesus, God had visited them. They missed Jesus.

These people got a lot right. But they didn't know Jesus. And they were lost.

And like Jerusalem, like Jesus, we can like a Messiah who might give me what I want. But to think that Jesus is good because He's useful is to miss who He is.

He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. God who came to dwell among us.

Beware the heart that loves Jesus because of what he can give you.

We can make Christianity the new way we pursue the same old idols. Jesus becomes for us the shiny ladder we climb to get them.

And we use Jesus to violate the first commandment, which says "you shall have no other Gods before me."³

Jesus is not our means to something better than Jesus, because there is nothing better than Jesus.

Look at Jesus:

- 1) **Look at how tender and eager to be kind** He is. He knew Judas was with them all along, He knew what He would do. But around the table, Jesus washed Judas's feet. Jesus gave Judas the bread that represented His body torn for Him. He knows Judas is just in it for the money, He knows He will sell Jesus out, He knows those kisses in Gethsemane are lies. He knows - and He offers Judas Himself anyways.

³ Exodus 20:3

Look how much He loves as He weeps over Jerusalem, longing to bring them under His wings and comfort them.

Jesus is always far kinder than we would expect Him to be.

2) Look at how Jesus is the True and Better Solomon.

When Jesus comes into the city, rather than having his head anointed with oil, he's going to have a crown of thorns pressed into his head.

When he comes into the city, he's going to encounter enemies, just like Solomon did. But rather than have them executed, He is going to die their death for them. He's going to pray from the cross for their forgiveness.

3) Look how He has all the power in the universe - riding that unbroken colt, and still goes to the cross willingly, giving Himself for us.

If this is who Jesus is, can we really say, "I will worship Jesus if he does this, and if He doesn't, I'm out. Jesus didn't deliver?"

If all He ever did was give His life for us, pray for His enemies, and burst open the grave, isn't He worthy of our worship?

And shouldn't that worship shape us? As we become like the God we worship?

If we really believe this, doesn't it make us forgiving people (offering forgiveness even to the worst), kind people, even to our enemies, joyful people who have been saved from our biggest problem - our sin and separation from God.

Prayer of Confession

**Adapted from a Prayer Entitled "Heavenly Mindedness" in
Prone to Wander by Barbara and Wayne Duguid (pp. 196-197)**

Father,

We have come before you to worship you, but as we speak words of worship and sing songs of praise, we are reminded by your Word that we are to have no other gods before you. We have fallen short of keeping this great command. Our worship of you is neither consistent nor wholehearted. You have called us to set our minds on things above, yet

we habitually allow our minds to slip back toward things of earth and think you are good because you give us the stuff we want, as opposed to believing you are good because of who you are.

Lord Jesus Christ, we ask for your rescue, but we think our biggest need is for that stuff and not for our souls. We crave those answers, but then learn to live in blindness toward the sin that so easily ensnares us, assuming that we are better than we are and smugly satisfied that we are not like other sinners. Others of us have established rituals of self-hatred to cope with the sin that we find in our hearts, hoping that if we just work hard enough, you might find it possible to forgive our sins. One thing we have in common is that none of us sees our own sin clearly.

We make too much or too little of it, and thereby obscure our view of your cross.

Holy Spirit, lead us back to the good news of the gospel: that all our sin has been put to death, fully and finally, by Christ on the cross. Help us to see the reality of our justification: we have been raised with Christ, and our relationship with God has been secured as beloved children. Help us to put to death the remaining sin in our hearts, but give us the confidence to admit that our struggle with sin is ongoing, and will be so until you glorify us.

Give us bold faith that lingers at the cross longer than we linger over our sins. Entice us with the good news from above, so that our worship might flow from transformed hearts enraptured by a God who loved us first. Clear our spiritual vision, we pray, that we might see our souls as hidden with Christ on high, our Savior and our God. In his name we come, amen.

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) Discuss the difference between worshiping Jesus because He is useful and worshiping Jesus because He is the Lord.
- 2) How common do you suppose Judas's way of viewing Jesus is today?
- 3) How are we sometimes like Judas?
- 4) Why did Jesus weep over Jerusalem?
- 5) In what ways do we miss Jesus?