



RESPONDING TO JESUS

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Well, at this point in the service I guess you don't need me to tell you that it's Palm Sunday. The kids pretty well made that clear right up front. Kids around the world marched through churches with branches in their hands this morning, looking cute and singing songs.

It's a little strange when you stop to think about it. Why do we do that? What is it all about? If you're not familiar with the story of Palm Sunday from the Bible, it is hard to make much sense of it. Even when you've grown up with the story, it's easy to forget why we go back to it year after year.

So let's take a look at Luke's version of events and see what we can make of them.

Luke 19:28-44

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

They replied, "The Lord needs it."

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

This is the story of what is called the triumphal entry – Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem. On the Sunday of the week he would be killed, Jesus rides into town with what feels like a victory parade. But then it all ends, and everything changes quickly. And you're left wondering, "What just happened?"

Every time I preach on Palm Sunday I wrestle with the story. It is a complex series of events, and you get the sense that something is going on beneath the surface. It reminds me of what Shrek once said: "Ogres are like onions. They've got layers." This story has so many layers of meaning. I always feel like I peel back one part of it and start to understand it, I see that underneath there's a whole new level of meaning in what Jesus did.

I'm not much of a wine drinker, let alone an expert on the wine making process. But I do know that if you throw a little yeast in some grape juice, something's going to start happening. The enzymes in the yeast will start altering the chemical composition of the juice, breaking down the sugars. Pretty soon you get this bubbling going that shows the fermentation is starting.

The situation on that first Palm Sunday was beginning to ferment. Things are starting to bubble up. Jesus' actions are like the enzymes that start a chemical reaction.

What is fascinating to me is to look at how deliberately Jesus is doing everything in this story. He's had it all planned for some time. Long before these events, clear back in chapter 9, Luke gives us a hint about what's coming:

Luke 9:51

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

From that point on he continues to teach. He visits several towns. He heals a lot of people. But he's always headed in the same direction, which is toward Jerusalem. He's focused. It has been in the back of his mind as he has made his way through all the surrounding villages. And he has timed his arrival in Jerusalem precisely to coincide with Passover, when hundreds of thousands of pilgrims would converge on Jerusalem to

remember God's deliverance from Egypt. It's a big crowd, and everyone is thinking about God's salvation plan.

Up until this time, Jesus has been telling people to keep quiet about who he is. He would heal someone and instruct them not to share it with anyone. When big groups would start to get excited about his miracles, he would slip away from the crowds and hide himself. He had an ability to keep the excitement under control and not let a mob mentality take over.

On this trip to Jerusalem things are different. He starts out while miracles such as raising Lazarus from the dead are still very fresh in people's minds. He doesn't walk in like an ordinary Passover pilgrim would have – he rides in on a donkey. It's a symbolic gesture and the crowd gets excited by it. Jesus is acting differently here, and it is causing all kinds of reactions. His moves called for those around him to respond. He couldn't be ignored.

I see this story as a metaphor for our lives. Jesus is still on a mission. Only now, he's headed our direction. We're now Jerusalem. He rides in and looks around, and we're like the people in this story, having to react to who he is and what he does. And the same questions that confronted each of the people in the story also confront us.

So let's travel along the parade route with him and look a little more closely at the people he encountered and the issues each of them needed to face.

As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them.

I get asked to do a lot of strange things on my job. I have had to plan citywide scavenger hunts for company parties. I've had to take pictures of grass. I've had to fly to different cities where I would drive around in a rental car, looking at countless billboards to determine which ones would be best for a client. The most bizarre thing I've had to do was probably working at the Puyallup Fair managing the Cow Pie Bingo game, which I won't elaborate on right now. I've just come to expect the unexpected in my job and go with the flow.

And I'm sure that at this point in their three years with Jesus, the disciples must have been used to the unexpected from Jesus. They know his style and they trust him. But still, this time is definitely one of the more unusual requests he has made of them. He actually wants them to just walk right into town, find a donkey they've never seen and take it as if they have every right to do it. They're not supposed to ask. They're not supposed to apologize. They're not even supposed to sneak.

How would you feel about doing that? I think it was wise of him to send two disciples, because I know that if I got asked to do something like that all by myself without someone else to lean on, I think I'd be too scared or embarrassed to do it. What if I don't see a donkey? What if I got caught? What if the owner is really big and wants to beat me up? I'd definitely want a partner to watch my back.

By sending the disciples on this mission, Jesus is implicitly asking them, "Are you willing? Are you willing to trust me on this? Are you willing to step out and do something risky?"

There were a lot of things they didn't know. They didn't know if the donkey would be there. They didn't know what kind of trouble they would get into. They didn't even know why Jesus needed a donkey in the first place. All they had was his question: Are you willing? Will you do it?

Following Jesus always involves trusting him with the unknowns and taking a risk. Did you ever play that trust game with a group, where you're blindfolded and you're supposed to fall backwards and have everyone catch you? Why is that so hard to do? Because we want to see what we're getting into. We want to know the outcome ahead of time.

But God doesn't always work that way. He asks for our trust up front, then reveals as much as we need to know.

It's hard to take risks. But look at what happened to those disciples. Luke tells us they found everything was exactly how Jesus said it would be. What a great experience, and they could have missed it entirely if they had not been willing to go.

Christ asks each one of us if we're willing to do something for him. Sometimes it feels stupid and embarrassing and insignificant. I've gotten upset with customer service people on the phone before and one time afterwards felt Christ saying, "Are you willing to call that stranger back and apologize?" And I thought in my head, "Do I have to? I don't even know that person. It's part of their job, isn't it?" I can come up with a million justifications for not being willing. But I finally did it and found that I felt better, had a good conversation and more importantly -- God changed my heart, regardless of what the other person thought.

Being willing to go on those kinds of assignments are tough when it's a stranger, and 10 times harder when it's a coworker or spouse or child. Being willing to hit the remote when something inappropriate comes on the TV and say "the Lord needs my mind". Being willing to befriend the person who grates on everyone in the office and say "the Lord needs this person". Being willing to start spiritual conversations in our family and say "the Lord needs this home."

Jesus asks us: Are you willing to go where I'm asking, to try something risky, to trust that I know what I'm doing? When we do, we'll have the joy of discovering everything will be exactly how he said it would be.

Those two disciples didn't hesitate to go do what they were asked. What that meant was that another person was going to be confronted with Jesus' questions.

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

They replied, "The Lord needs it."

Donkeys were the pack animals of that time, beasts of burden. Today, the equivalent would be pick-up trucks. So imagine you had just bought a new little Ford Ranger and you'd had it fitted with a new liner in the bed. You haven't used it to haul anything yet. It's parked out in your driveway, and one day you look out the window and see someone opening the door and getting in.

You'd rush out there and say, "What are you doing? That's my truck!"

They'd say back, "The Lord needs it." And you'd say, "Yeah right. Get out."

That donkey owner was faced with a serious choice. Does he let go of what represents his future livelihood for the sake of Jesus' mission, or does he hold on more tightly and say, "Sorry – it's mine. I need it too."

The question that's hanging in front of him is this: Are you clinging? Are you gripping what you have so tightly that you won't let God use it?

Possessions are funny things. We may think they don't really matter that much to us, but raise the possibility of taking them away and we start to realize how attached we are to our stuff. We can talk about loving God, but if he asks for something we own, how do we respond? Jesus said this:

Matthew 6:21

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

If we can't let God make use of something that's ours, whether it is money or possessions or a job or a talent, we have to ask where our heart really is. Do we hold what we own loosely?

There are some times when we look at what we have and say, "It's just a donkey. What can God possibly want with a donkey?" We can't imagine how he could use something we have. That can block our way as well. We grip more tightly because we don't really believe God can make something of it.

There's a song called That's When that says when we don't have much to offer, God steps in and says "What's that you have in your hand? I can use it, if you're willing to lose it. Take the little you have and make it grand. I am El Shaddai and I'll more than supply your need."

In Matthew's version of our story, he included the fact that Jesus instructed the disciples to tell the owner that Jesus would send back the donkey when he was finished with it. God gives back what he asks us for. We don't need to worry that there won't be anything left for us when we give to God. He more than supplies our need.

The donkey's arrival prompts a whole crowd of disciples to consider that same question.

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

Throwing coats on the ground was the equivalent of rolling out the red carpet so that a king wouldn't have to come in contact with the dirt. But it's on a more personal level than red carpet, because I'm giving up my own coat. It's the only one I have. By throwing it down, I'm showing my personal allegiance to this king. I'm lowering myself in comparison to him.

Sometimes, when Jesus asks us what we're gripping, the answer isn't possessions. It's our pride. We don't want to get our coat dirty. We'd rather have a parade that celebrates us.

The word "Hosanna" doesn't appear in Luke's telling of the story, but the other gospel writers tell us that as the people were laying down their coats and waving the palm branches, that's what they said. The word Hosanna means "Save us." In the process of worshipping God, the people were also crying out for help.

To fully enter into the joy of praising God always involves humbling ourselves. Following Christ means throwing down our pride and saying Hosanna. I need you Jesus. Save me. You're the king who's coming with the answers. I set aside my pride. I let go of my possessions. I loosen my grip for you.

As Jesus moves along down the road, the singing and the palm waving and the coat throwing are starting to attract attention.

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

A domino effect has been happening. The disciples respond to Jesus and go for the donkey, which causes the owner of the donkey to respond, which causes the crowd to respond, which now brings the Pharisees into direct confrontation with Jesus.

The Pharisees get a bad rap sometimes in the Bible, but Jesus spent a lot of time with them. They were the religious teachers who were regularly interacting with him, debating him, wrestling with what he had to say. They took his words seriously and they've watched his ministry grow.

And this time they're caught off guard, because he isn't controlling the crowd the way he normally did. They're getting more and more wound up as they get closer to the city. And that has the Pharisees nervous.

Because during a holiday like this, Roman security would have been tightened. They would be on the lookout for people who wanted to cause a riot or uprising. There was a lot of talk about trying to overthrow the Romans, and all this talk about Jesus being a king could attract too much attention and cause problems for the whole country.

And so the Pharisees rebuke Jesus. "Make them stop!" And in essence he asks them, "Are you fearing something? Are you worried about what will happen here?"

What Jesus saw was that the crowd was speaking truth, truth that couldn't be quieted. If they didn't say it, somebody had to respond, even if it was just the rocks. God's glory had been revealed in all these miracles that Jesus had done, he's showing who he is on this trip to Jerusalem, and it calls for response.

The Pharisees weren't even concerned with the truth of what was being said. They could only see the consequences. And it made them fearful that their world was going to be disrupted.

Jesus doesn't fit in our plans. We hear about who he is, and it makes us nervous. He's going to interrupt our lifestyle. He's going to make changes. And we start fearing those changes.

Even when we've known Jesus for a long time, fear of the changes he'll bring can still creep in. As I said before, these Pharisees had been around Jesus during his entire ministry. They should have known by now that he wasn't a political revolutionary. He wasn't there to overthrow the government. But their fears overwhelmed them.

If they had stopped for a moment to look at Jesus sitting on that donkey, they might have realized that there wasn't a need to be afraid. Jesus wasn't coming into town to pick a

fight. His arrival was a cause for joy. He planned it to fulfill the words of the prophet Zechariah:

Zechariah 9:9

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.

He's gentle. And he comes bringing salvation. We can trust him with our fears.

As his trip comes to its end, Jesus comes up to the crest of a hill, and the whole city of Jerusalem opens out in front of him.

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

The final question Jesus asks is to the entire city of Jerusalem and it is this: Are you seeing? Do you recognize me?

It's sad that the triumphal entry really ends in tragedy. The king isn't even recognized by his people. The city didn't understand who Jesus was. They didn't realize what it was that could bring them peace. It was an opportunity missed.

I read an excerpt from a book this week called *In Harm's Way*, about the sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis. The Indianapolis was torpedoed during World War II, and it sank almost immediately. The crew was left alone in life boats for days before they were rescued. During that time, some of the men got so dehydrated that they started hallucinating and not thinking straight.

In one of the boats was a sailor named McCoy, and another sailor named Payne. And Payne was so delirious that he wanted to jump out of the life boat. McCoy knew there were sharks in the water, because he could see them. But Payne jumped out anyway and started swimming away. So McCoy jumped in after him and brought him back to the raft. The next thing he knew, there was Payne, jumping in the water again. So McCoy jumped in again too, watching the sharks circle all the time. Even then, Payne couldn't understand why McCoy was coming after him.

As I read about their struggle, I thought about how hard we fight against being rescued by God. We don't see what he's trying to do. He's wanting to help us, and we keep trying to swim away and take our chances with the sharks.

Jesus said if only the people had known what it was that would bring them peace, things would have been so much different. But they refused it.

It all comes down to this on Palm Sunday: Are we seeing Jesus? He's right in front of us, offering to bring peace into our lives. This is the moment of God's visiting us. Now is the time. How are we going to respond?

The arrival of Jesus always causes a reaction. As we wrap up this morning, look one more time at the four questions we've considered:

Are we willing? Can we trust Jesus enough to take a risk?

Are we clinging? What are we holding on to tightly either in terms of possessions or pride that we need to release to God?

Are we fearing? What changes are we afraid will result from Christ being in our lives?

Are we seeing? Do we recognize the opportunity Jesus is putting in front of us? He's offering us the chance to find the peace we're seeking. All we have to do is join the crowd in throwing down our coats, and saying "Hosanna – Save us."