

Here Comes Jesus • Matthew 21:1-11

We all want hope. Opening day of major league baseball season brings a full stadium of spectators for even the worst of teams. On opening day every baseball fan can dream of a World Series victory six months later. The sickest patient is given hope when a prominent new physician is assigned to her team, someone who has had astonishing success treating her disease. She is convinced that this doctor will make all the difference and will not only save her life but give her long-term health. Parents whose children do poorly in school are excited about the new teacher who promises to bring out the best in underachieving students.

The person who brings hope is sometimes called a messiah. “Messiah” means “anointed” and refers to one who brings the best out of the worst. He is the new coach who comes to bring victories to a losing team. She is the lawyer who wins impossible court cases. It is the general who will lead a defeated army to triumph. He is the CEO who will turn the bankrupt company into a profitable company. It is the pastor who can bring new people to a declining church. It is the political candidate who will turn the country around with new jobs, economic prosperity and wise foreign policy. He is the knight-on-a-white-horse who will bring lasting happiness to the lonely maiden’s difficult life. In our worst of times we all are looking for a messiah to come to the rescue.

That’s the way it was for the Hebrew people. They had waited a very long time and they were ready. The glory days of Israel were long past. The nation was spiritually divided. The land was occupied by the oppressive Roman army. Simply stated, these were the worst of times. They needed help. Then Jesus came!

Jerusalem was a relatively small city but at Passover Jews came from all over the Roman Empire and far beyond. Some historians say that the population of the city for that special week would expand to as much as 2½ million people.

They were downtrodden people looking for someone to save them from their problems.

The Jewish hope was deeply rooted in divine promise. Five hundred years earlier the prophet Zechariah had predicted the coming of a messiah-king who would deliver the nation from oppression and subjugation. The words of the prediction were well known and highly anticipated. In Zechariah 9:9-12 we read:

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,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

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.

His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As for you, because of the blood of my covenant
with you,

I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope;
even now I announce that I will restore twice

as much to you.

The Jews in Jerusalem knew these words by heart. They had heard them from childhood. God promised a king, a savior from oppression and a leader who would set them free. Happy days

would soon be here again. They would be twice as prosperous as ever before.

Frankly, they had waited a long time. The glory days of Israel had been a thousand years earlier during the reigns of King David and King Solomon. After Solomon’s reign the kingdom was permanently divided by civil war. Foreign nations conquered their land, stole their wealth, killed their sons, raped their women, carried large numbers

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into distant slavery and the country was left in poverty. Perhaps the lowest point was reached in 165 B.C. when a Greek general named Antiochus Epiphanes invaded Israel and desecrated the temple by offering a pig on the high altar and using the temple rooms for prostitution. By Jesus' time the Romans occupied Israel with brutal martial law and heavy taxation. God's people were ready for God's promises to come true.

We all know what it's like to live off promises. The promise of better times gets us through the pains of life. Our troubles may not be anything like those of first century Jews but we all have problems, fears and worries. As long as we have hope we can carry on. When hope runs out we are ready to give up.

Christians are people of promises. We live off the promises of God. He has promised to never leave us or forsake us. He has promised to hear and answer our prayers. He has promised to supply our every need. He has promised to go with us all the way through this life, whatever that includes, and to usher us safely into eternal life. When Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday he came to fulfill the promises of God; and when Jesus comes into our lives he does the same thing. He comes to us to fulfill the great promises of God.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the cheering of the crowds he was well prepared. For the first thirty years of his life he had lived in obscurity. Hardly anyone knew him or had heard anything about him. But then he burst on the scene with miracles and stunning teaching. He gathered around him a cadre of disciples and for three-and-a-half years he worked diligently to keep the lid on his celebrity as he fed people by the thousands, helped the blind to see and the lame to walk and even raised the dead back to life. He admitted that he was the Messiah and everyone wanted to spread the word but he kept telling them to keep silent. Jesus wanted to go public by his schedule and not because of the demands of others.

But now the time was right. This was the time of Jesus' choosing and it was a perfect time. Jesus had recently raised Lazarus from the dead and all

Jerusalem was abuzz. This was the pinnacle of his miracles and demonstrated his supernatural powers. The people said that if he could raise the dead back to life he could do anything. It was a lid that couldn't be kept on.

The crowds were huge and provided maximum exposure to his message. Millions could experience Jesus for themselves, more than at any other time or place. If ever Jesus' teaching could penetrate to the masses this was the time it was going to happen.

Jesus knew all the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and he carefully fulfilled their predictions. Jesus made sure that every detail of prophecy came true. He even arranged for a donkey at a specific place. Jesus set up in advance with the donkey's owner and predetermined a password to give so that the donkey would be provided for him to ride. Jesus was on his way to the cross and this was the first day of his final journey. Matthew 21:2-7 tells us:

... Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet (Zechariah):

"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, place their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them.

Ancient conquerors usually rode magnificent war horses. The horse was the symbol of strength and conquest and power. But Jesus rode a donkey, a symbol of simplicity, peace and humility. Today it would be the difference between arriving in a Mercedes stretch limousine or the back of a pickup truck.

Ten thousand times over I am impressed with Jesus and the way he did everything. I am im-

pressed with his courage, going to Jerusalem when he knew that powerful leaders wanted to kill him. My instinct tells me that I would go and hide and wait for a safer day; but Jesus took the threat head on.

Jesus kept his focus. I am so impressed that his head was not turned and his mission was not changed by the demands of the crowd. Jesus' mission in life was to die on the cross and he was not going to be distracted from it.

I'm impressed with his preparation down to the finest detail. I find it a bit unusual that he did not delegate the hiring of a donkey but instead made the preparations personally. He was the one who set up the password to guarantee that the rental would take place.

Why would he do that? Because Jesus is a leader who gives great attention to the details of life. I find enormous comfort in that. It tells me that he gives attention to the details of my life as well. While he may be responsible for the running of the universe he also cares about every minute of my daily schedule. He is concerned about my health and finances and relationships. I often forget that. I forget it when I get caught up in the stresses and problems of day-to-day living. But when I stop long enough to reflect on past years I can see that Jesus has been engaged in every detail of my life. Yesterday he prepared me for today; today he is preparing me for tomorrow.

Here is great comfort here for us all. As important as he is Jesus cares about us. When he comes into our lives it is to accomplish God's very best. Never think that all that happens in your life is just random or chance. Never imagine that this God of the universe is too busy with big stuff to care about our small stuff because this same Jesus works the details of our daily circumstances.

The crowd that Sunday knew what they expected of Jesus. They wanted him to become their king. They wanted him to muster an army, over-

throw the Roman government and bring them prosperity.

As they welcomed Jesus into the city the people took off their coats to carpet the road. It was to honor Jesus but it was also to create souvenirs. "This is the coat that welcomed the Messiah." "King Jesus walked on this jacket!" Someday they could sell it on E-bay and get big bucks for this special coat they had offered!

They cut down branches to wave and celebrate. This is the way they welcomed kings and conquerors in previous generations. It was their equivalent of a ticker-tape parade, throwing confetti or releasing balloons at a political convention.

They shouted until they were hoarse. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." "Hosanna in the highest!" They were using an old Hebrew expression that meant "Save us!" but had evolved to become a cheer of praise and admiration. Today it would be applause, whistles and "Yea, Jesus!"

They were excited. They knew what they expected. And, they were disappointed. Quite frankly, Jesus did not meet their expectations. He did not follow their agenda. He was on a different mission. When they realized that he would not give them what they wanted, in less than a week they changed their chant to "Crucify him!"

Palm Sunday was not what the crowd expected from Jesus nor was it what Jesus wanted from the crowd. Jesus wanted them to acknowledge him as the Son of God. He wanted them to submit to his leadership and will. He wanted them to love him for who he was and not for what they could get

out of him. He wanted to be much more than the king of their country; he wanted to be the king of their hearts.

It's as simple as this: Jesus wanted them to do what he wanted them to do and they wanted Jesus to do what they wanted. The lesson in this for us

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is that when we praise Jesus with our coats and cheers it is not to get our way but it is to celebrate his way. Praise for Jesus is rooted in gratitude and not in greed.

Recently I was in Calcutta and visited the home of Mother Teresa. We went to the hospice where she first began taking in the dying poor off the streets. We spent time with the severely disabled babies who have been abandoned by their own mothers. We visited the simple tomb of Mother Teresa on the first floor of the house where she had lived. In each place there are saying on the walls from this tiny lady who was born in Macedonia and died in India. They say things like “Trust Jesus!” and they recount the privilege and joy of serving the poorest of the poor. She didn’t served Jesus for what she got from him but for what she could do for him!

At the end of the Palm Sunday story in Matthew 21:10-11 we read:

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

I have read that over and over again and it still seems so strange to me. Here they were, wildly celebrating Jesus as the Messiah and King but they didn’t seem to really know who he was. They paraded and praised him as so much more than a prophet but they identified him as just one more of a long line of Jewish preachers.

But he wasn’t just another prophet; he wasn’t one more in a long line of Jewish preachers. He was the Son of God who came in human skin. He was the Savior of humankind and they didn’t even know it.

Well, that was then and this is now. That was their Palm Sunday and this is ours. Let us cel-

brate Jesus even more than they did because we should understand so much better. Let us be willing to give him the shirts off our backs in adoration and worship. Let us thrill at his promises to us. Let us take comfort and hope in the attention he gives to every detail of our lives. And, let us gratefully seek to meet his expectations for our lives.

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