

A King Without a Crown

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois –March 20, 2016 (Palm Sunday)

Luke 4:16-30 ESV

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did

at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away.

Luke 19:28-44 ESV

And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'"

So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" And they said, "The Lord has need of it."

And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. As he was drawing near — already on the way down the Mount of Olives — the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 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. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 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."

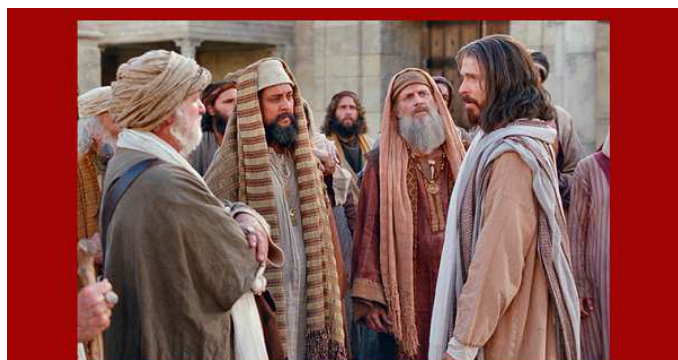
Picture the scene, if you will — the scene we reenact each year on Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding into Jerusalem, riding upon a donkey. The prophet Zechariah portrayed the scene more than five centuries earlier: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey"

(Zechariah 9:9). Israel looked forward to the arrival of the Lord's anointed one, the Messiah — for that's what the Hebrew word *mashiach* means, one who has been anointed with holy oil to assume leadership of the people. It was a title applied to the kings of Israel and Judah; they were known as "the Lord's Anointed" — see, for example, Psalm 2. And, ground down under the oppressive boot of foreign rulers, now that of Caesar, the Judeans longed for what old Simeon called "the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25), the appearance of the Anointed One who would restore the glory of the people the Lord had called to be his own, and to take his name to all nations of the earth.

The hope was for the coming of Messiah, or in the Greek form, Christ, the Anointed One of the Lord. And, by the way, you may have noticed that I usually refer to Jesus as *Messiah*, rather than Christ, because I want to make clear that the New Testament writers see Jesus as fulfilling the role, first of all, of the redeemer of Israel — the One who brings God's plan for his chosen people to fulfillment. When, in English, we say "Jesus Christ" it sounds like "Christ" is Jesus' last name — as though his parents were Joseph and Mary Christ. Obviously, that's not correct! When the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ it's referring to Jesus as the Messiah of Israel — and, exactly because he's *the Messiah or anointed King of Israel* he's also *ruler over the whole earth*. For in Psalm 2 God declares to his Anointed, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" (Psalm 2:7-8). We can't grasp the meaning of who Jesus is *for us* until we understand clearly who he is for "Israel," the name the New Testament gives to the fellowship of *all those who answer the call of God* to serve him in any age, regardless of ethnicity.

So back to Jerusalem in probably the year 30 AD. Down the Mount of Olives winds this odd procession — Jesus riding the donkey, the mount of the hoped-for King according to Zechariah. Before and after him come, Luke says, "the whole multitude of his disciples," laying their garments out on the path before him, and (as we learn from Mark) spreading leafy branches cut from the nearby fields — which is why we call this event Palm Sunday, and wave the palms ourselves. These people celebrating aren't just the twelve disciples; Luke says there's a "multitude," a large number of people who've been following Jesus or who may have come out from the city of Jerusalem to welcome him. And they're greeting him with acclamations: "Hosanna! — *'hoshì ah nà*, "Rescue us!" a quotation from Psalm 118. They're crying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

No wonder the authorities in Jerusalem are nervous about Jesus, especially after he goes into the Temple and clears out the trade going on in the outer court. Someone claiming to be King is going to get the attention of the Romans, who have a garrison stationed in a fortress built right up against the Temple walls. Relations



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." -- Luke 19:39-40



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. -- Zechariah 9:9

are dicey enough between the Jewish authorities and the Roman local administration, and any disturbance like this is cause for concern. Other would-be Messiahs have come, and more would come later, and their end has always been the same: swift execution by Rome and brutal suppression of their movements. Would this would-be Messiah be any different? they must be wondering. Yes, multitudes are welcoming Jesus; we've got to stir up our own multitude to call for his death! As John tells it, even Caiphas the high priest would declare to his associates, "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" — not realizing how truly he spoke (John 11:50).

Luke records that the Pharisees, witnessing this procession into the holy city, appealed to Jesus to restrain his enthusiastic followers. "Tell them to stop," they cried — for they knew all too well the danger they were in if someone entered the city claiming to be king, a rival to Caesar. But did the Pharisees, or the other Jerusalem authorities, understand what sort of king — what sort of Messiah — Jesus was to be? For that matter, did his disciples at this point even understand? Evidently Judas didn't, and no doubt others as well who, if they didn't eventually betray Jesus, perhaps like Peter denied knowing him when things got serious, or just ran away? And, we must ask, do we understand now, two millennia later, what sort of Messiah Jesus is? What did Jesus, himself, think about that question?

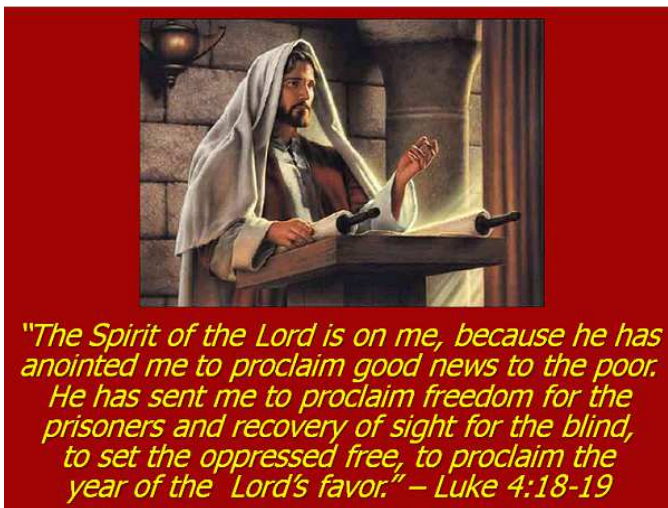
To reach for an answer, let's go back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry as the Gospels record it. Today, on Palm Sunday, we're in Jerusalem. But to search out Jesus' intention, or his Messianic perspective, we need to tell "a tale of two cities": Jerusalem at the end of the story, Nazareth at the beginning. So our investigation takes us back to Nazareth, and Jesus' teaching in the synagogue recorded in Luke's chapter 4.

Jesus has been brought up in Nazareth. Despite what popular movies or books try to tell us, we know little about what really happened in Jesus' life during his childhood and early manhood. Luke provides only a brief glimpse of the consternation the twelve-year-old Jesus caused his parents when he lingered behind after the festival, astounding the teachers in Jerusalem with his wisdom and understanding of the Scriptures. Other than that we have nothing until Jesus, at about the age of 30, submits to baptism by John the Baptizer in the River Jordan. He is then tested in the wilderness, tested concerning what sort of ministry he will have to his people. He rebukes the juicy bait the devil sets before him with those enticing words, "If you are the Son of God . . ." He throws off the temptation to impress people with showy miracles and imperial power, answering each test with a quotation from the Scriptures — in particular, the Book of Deuteronomy. And only after this forty-day test does Jesus begin to announce the arrival of God's kingdom, calling people to follow him and teaching in the synagogues of Galilee. So we find him back in Nazareth, the returning "home-town boy" now being given the honor of reading the Scriptures for the day, as was the local custom.



Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. -- Luke 4:1-2

In the synagogue the reading from the Law of Moses, or *Torah*, was set for each day. But the custom was developing of also reading a portion from the Prophets, called the *Haftarah*, and the reader was allowed to select the passage. Jesus takes the scroll and turns to Isaiah 61 where he reads these words:



"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." -- Luke 4:18-19

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor . . . (Isaiah 61:1-2).

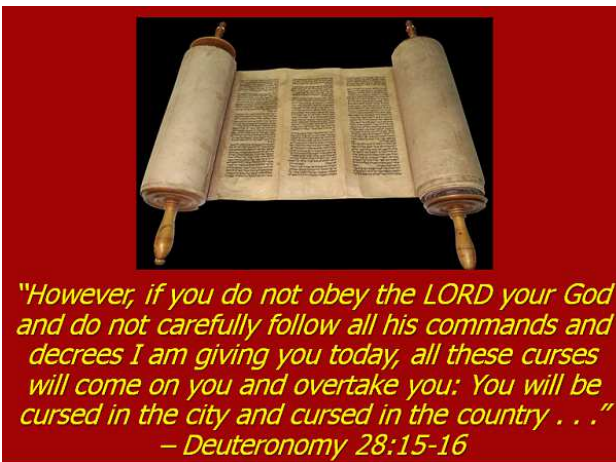
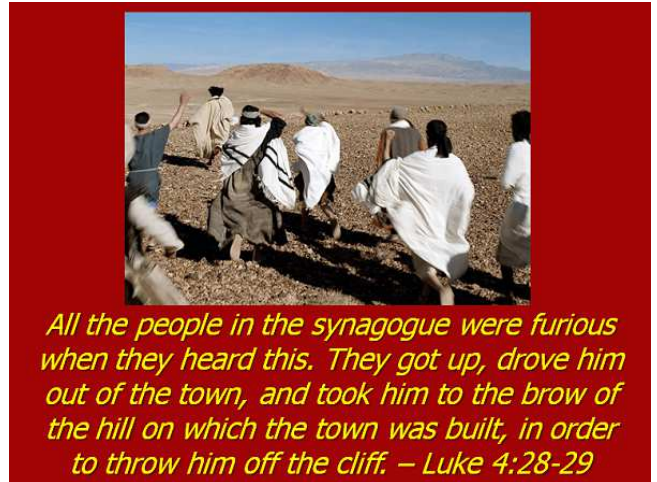
And then he stops reading. He doesn't complete the verse, for the next line is, "and the day of *vengeance* of our God." Is Jesus leaving a clue here to what sort of Messiah he will be — not the hoped-for Messiah who would *punish* the enemies of Israel, but one with a different agenda? So far, Jesus has impressed the worshipers; Luke says that "all spoke well of him and marveled" at his gracious words. But Jesus isn't through; he reminds his hearers of how, during a famine in Israel,

the Lord sent Elijah only to a poor widow in the Gentile region of Sidon; and how during Elisha's day while there were many lepers in Israel only Naaman, a Syrian official, was healed. Clearly, Jesus is sending a

message: Israel has “dropped the ball,” it has failed to do what God called it to do when he called Abraham to be a blessing to all nations of the world. But God is reaching out to all people to bring them into his family.

Let’s review the story the Bible tells. God made a good world, a beautiful world. He put people in charge of it — he made them in his image, to represent him in the management of creation. But people forgot their calling under God; they yielded to the tempter who said, “You will be like God.” They built a tower, planning to reach to the heavens and make a name for themselves. That’s what people are like without the Lord, and the result is strife, violence, enmity, misery across the human scene. But God had a plan: to call one family, the descendants of Abraham, that would serve him and reach out to all people with the message that God cares about them and wants to bless them, if they will only come back to him. Sadly, the people God called failed to obey him and turned away to other gods, or else took God’s call as a sign of his special favor rather than a special responsibility. The people God called to solve the problem became *part of the problem*. God wants his name to be carried before all people, but for the most part his chosen ones have kept the name of the Lord all to themselves.

No wonder, then, that when Jesus dares to confront his fellow worshipers in Nazareth with their unfaithfulness they rise up in anger and try to throw him out of town. His “take” in what the Messiah is supposed to do doesn’t fit their agenda, so they reject him. And, in our “tale of two cities,” the same thing is about to happen in Jerusalem as Jesus comes down the Mount of Olives in procession, welcomed as the King who comes in the Lord’s name. For Jesus knows, and has already told his followers, that he’s riding to his death. For that’s the kind of Messiah he is: the Servant of the Lord who will bear the sins of his unfaithful people to his cross and in that way set them free, just as Isaiah had long ago prophesied: “He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).



For Israel to be restored to its true purpose and calling, the Messiah has to take all their sin upon himself and bear the penalty for it on his cross. He has to bear the curse of the Law, the horrible destiny stipulated in the Law of Moses for those who turn away from the life to which God has called them. These curses, found at the end of the Torah in Deuteronomy 27 and 28, are so severe and so gruesome that we would probably never read that part of the Bible as a Scripture lesson in church. But that’s what Messiah must bear to set things right. As the apostle Paul states in Galatians, the Messiah “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ — so that in [Messiah] Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:13-14). Through the cross, you and I have been included in “the blessing of Abraham” — what the New Testament calls “salvation.”

So today we gladly join the celebration of those who greeted Jesus with shouts of “Save us, Hosanna!” on that first day of what we call Holy Week. Did that multitude know, as Jesus himself surely understood, what lay ahead for the Messiah before that week was over? Do we understand what Jesus went through in the Garden of Gethsemane, wrestling with the agony that overcame him as he contemplated what lay ahead, and crying out, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. . . . Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:34, 36)? His anguish was so great, Luke

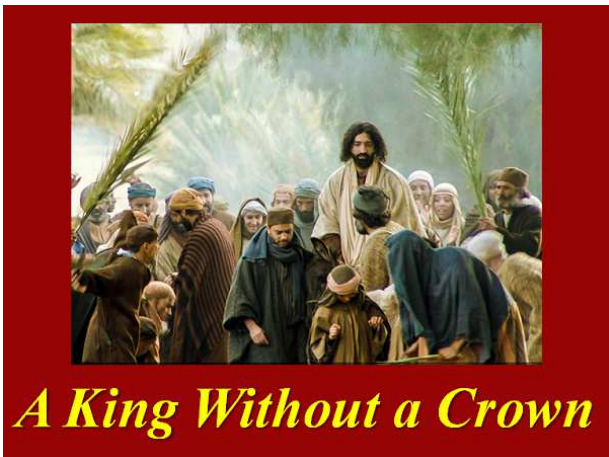
tells us, that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44). As Shirley Anne wrote, in her poem on the back of your worship folder:

*Creation held its breath while He wrestled with His will —
go forth and conquer death, these prophecies fulfill
in His own flesh and, by the grace of God, His blood spill
upon the cold and barren ground of Calvary's hill?*

*His spirit reeled, awash in scenes of horror, and of strife,
the outcome if He failed — men born to death, deprived of life
beyond the grave, and never to know God's Paradise —
but oh, the price! the awful price, the awful, dreadful, price!*

What day do you consider the critical turning point of world history, the day when everything about this world changed forever? When the astronauts of Apollo 11 landed on the moon in 1969, Neal Armstrong proclaimed his first footstep "one giant leap for mankind," and President Nixon declared it the greatest day in the history of the world. And, truly, for most people in Western culture the great turning point of history took place when people began to look to science and technology for answers to the most important questions of life. That took place in the seventeenth century, in what historians call "the Enlightenment" — a name which, in itself, reveals their bias. Before that time, on this view, people lived in ignorance and superstition, looking to God or "the gods" for answers about life. But now, "in this day and age" — now that we have modern science and technology — we can look to the laboratory, the observatory, the spacecraft, the research institute, the Edisons or Einsteins or Bill Gateses of the world for solutions to our problems. The great turning point of history, on this view, took place when people began to exclude "spiritual," or immaterial, factors when making basic decisions about the values they live by. And even Christians, who know this idea is wrong, often still live and act as if it's true because it has become part of our "worldview," the way we look at reality without even thinking about it.

The Gospels offer an alternative worldview. The day when the history of the world changed forever, and took a new turn, is the day Jesus wrestled with what sort of Messiah he was to be — and then lived out the pathway God showed him which led him to the cross where he took the sins of God's people upon himself. A Messiah isn't supposed to die, but the resurrection of Jesus shows that — all previous belief to the contrary — he is indeed the Anointed King, after all. He may be "a King without a crown," or only a crown of thorns, but when he was raised from the dead God's new creation of heaven and earth gained a foothold in this world. And that day, "the greatest day," changed history forever.



Text ©2016 Richard C. Leonard
Images from Internet sources