

Sermon: March 28, 2010, Palm Sunday
“Jesus: The Servant King”

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John 12:9-19

Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. (John 12:15)

I LOVE MARCH MADNESS! For those of you not into following sports, March Madness is the annual college basketball tournament involving the 65 best college basketball teams playing in a tournament format until the winning team is crowned champion. It is known as March Madness because every year the games are very competitive - many times teams from less known smaller colleges will beat teams from the larger well known schools in exciting, nail-biting kinds of games. In fact, in this year's tournament teams like Cornell, Northern Iowa, and Butler have defeated much more prominent teams. Butler in fact has made it to the “Final Four”, the national championship round, being held this year right in their hometown of Indianapolis. How exciting for them!

As exciting as this March Madness may be, it can't compare to the “March Madness” represented in our reading this morning from the Gospel of John. Twice John tells us that “great crowds” have gathered. The first crowd gathered in Bethany, a small town about two miles outside of Jerusalem, because they heard Jesus had returned to the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And they had gathered for a reason. It had been a number of weeks – we don't know exactly how long - since Jesus had

miraculously raised Lazarus to life after he had been dead for more than four days. This was more than sufficient time for news of this incredible event to travel far and wide – when had this kind of event been experienced before by the people of Palestine? In fact, John tells us the crowds on their way to the annual Passover Festival were buzzing about whether or not Jesus would be at the Festival. When they heard rumors Jesus was back in Bethany, many of them redirected their journey to go and see both Jesus and the one he had raised from the dead, much to the dismay of the religious leaders. It must have been quite a scene there in Bethany just a few days before Passover.

This is the second “great crowd” John is referring to in our passage today – the crowd arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Festival. Passover was the greatest of the annual pilgrimage festivals bringing Jewish believers to Jerusalem from far and wide. And a great crowd it truly was, certainly dwarfing the crowd gathered in Bethany. The Jewish historian Josephus writes about 30 years after this time about Passover crowds of 2.5 million people gathering in Jerusalem! Imagine the madness of dealing with that kind of crowd, finding a place to stay or food to eat or just a way to make it into and around the city and the Temple. It must have truly been madness for many!

Rabbi Jacob Neusner helps us understand the significance of Passover for the faithful Jew: “The Festival of Passover is known in Jewish tradition as the ‘Season of our Freedom.’ Its central theme is release. On the seasonal plane, it

marks the release of earth from the grip of winter. On the historical plane, it commemorates the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. On the broad human plane, it celebrates the emergence from bondage and idolatry.” So as these crowds are gathering in Jerusalem they are filled with memories of past release from bondage in Egypt and hopeful of future deliverance and release from the hardships of life and the Roman oppression which they live under even now. Would God hear their cries for freedom and deliverance?

There must have been an awareness in these great crowds of Jesus’ presence and the incredible things he had done! In addition to raising Lazarus from the dead, they must have heard as well of Jesus’ healing of a man born blind. And how many of them knew the stories of his feeding of the multitudes in Galilee with just a few loaves and fish either from hearing them told or from having experienced it themselves in person. Why at that time John tells us the crowds tried to take Jesus and make him King by force – they knew he was like no one they had known before this. Could he be the long awaited Messiah come to set God’s people free?

So it’s no surprise to see what happens as Jesus makes his way from Bethany to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover festivities as one of the many Jewish men fulfilling their religious obligations. The crowds spread the news - Jesus is coming to Jerusalem! They begin to buzz with excitement. The words of the Psalmist come to mind and they begin to shout “Hosanna! Blessed is

the one who comes in the name of the LORD!” Save now, O Lord is the meaning of Hosanna. Finally God has sent us the glorious deliverer who will raise us from the heap of oppression and shame and return glory to Israel once again they must have thought. Each Passover faithful Jews waited for the coming of the Messiah, the one who would return Israel to the glory days of David and Solomon. Certainly one who has raised the dead, restored sight to the blind, and fed the multitudes must be the One! And so they grab branches of the date palm tree growing nearby and begin waving them and joining in the madness of acclaiming the one who has come to bring salvation and victory to the Jewish nation.

Jesus has other things in mind, however. Watching the madness of the crowds around him, John tells us that Jesus finds a donkey as he is walking along the road and sits down on it, beginning to ride it down the road toward Jerusalem. He is enacting the prophecy of Zechariah which speaks of a deliverer who comes humbly, not riding a great war horse or chariot, but riding humbly on a donkey, a beast of burden. Jesus needs to be clear about why he has come: yes, to be a King, but a Servant King who brings deliverance not by force but by self sacrifice and humility. As Paul stated years later, Jesus did not hold onto his equality with God remaining in heaven, but he emptied himself and took on human form, becoming a servant who would lay down his life in obedience to the Father’s will. He was to be the servant king who, in the

words of Isaiah, would be despised and rejected, a man acquainted with grief and sorrow.

What a scene it must have been! John gives us a glimpse at another level as well when he says “His disciples did not understand these things at first...” (Jn. 12:16). In spite of Jesus’ teaching them on several occasions of his impending suffering and rejection by the people, they still did not comprehend the true meaning of his mission. And perhaps we are in the same company as well. Do we truly understand the significance of what Jesus has done for us as we enter once again into our remembrance of Holy Week? Like the disciples and the crowds, don’t we often cry out for a deliverer who will set us free from all in life that beats us down and wears us out? We too want a God who will give us success. We look for salvation as a means to achieve our own ends and goals much of the time. Yet Jesus comes to do the will of the Father and set us free from ourselves: from our sin and brokenness, from our attempts to earn our favor in God’s sight, from our selfish understanding of God as the one whom we command rather than the other way around. Perhaps in this Holy Week 2010 we can gain a clearer picture of this Servant King who comes to set us free in ways we have yet to fully appreciate! And we too can cry “Hosanna!” in a way that honors the sacrifice Jesus rode toward on that donkey in Jerusalem long ago. AMEN.