

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
Matthew 21:1–9
by Peter Bockoven

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ!

Our Gospel describes Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and how the people received him as Savior and King. We see that Jesus is unlike any other king that history has ever seen. He doesn't ride into Jerusalem with earthly glory, but with humility. And yet, the people still receive him as their king.

We receive Christ in a similar way still today. He doesn't come to us with earthly power or glory. He comes to us with humbleness, in the promises of his Gospel. But we still receive him as our king.

This seems like a strange thing to the natural mind. Shouldn't God come to us with great power, if he wants us to believe in him? It might seem stranger still when we compare the Old and New Testaments. Didn't God demonstrate earthly power to Israel, to create their faith in him? If so, why does he shift to the humility of Jesus in the New Testament?

But this is not a strange thing, at least to Scripture. For this is how God has always dealt with his people. And this is how he still deals with you and me for our benefit. So this morning, I want us to consider some instances from Scripture and our own lives as Christians that show this to be true: *God creates faith by humble promises, not by earthly power.*

The Gospel describes Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And it stresses the point that Jesus did this to fulfill a prophecy made by Zechariah. This prophecy was originally given to the Jewish people to strengthen their faith. For the Jews at that time had just come out of some incredibly difficult times.

They had just come out of captivity in Babylon. Because of their unfaithfulness, God allowed destruction to come upon them, through king Nebuchadnezzar. He destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and took its citizens captive. They were foreigners in a strange land. Their country was lost, promised to Abraham, given to them by God.

But God eventually delivered his people from Babylon. He brought them out of captivity, through Cyrus of Persia. And the people came back home. They started to rebuild their country. They started to rebuild the temple.

They were surely happy to be back home. But they were surely also afraid. They knew they were God's people, for God brought them back to Judah, to fulfill his promise to Abraham. But they probably saw the ruins from the destruction of Babylon. They probably wondered if they would break God's covenant again, and if they would be destroyed again.

It's in this setting that Zechariah gives these words to the people, as they were rebuilding the temple: **“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 ...”** (Zechariah 9:9). This promise gave the people a glimpse of Christ and his coming kingdom. It's as if the prophet is saying: “No, Judah, you won't be destroyed again. God will soon send your true king into the world. His kingdom will never be destroyed. And his people will never again be foreigners.” So the faithful of Judah were strengthened and encouraged by the promise, so that they were able to continue building, and wait patiently for the fulfillment for the fulfillment of the promise.

And just as the Old Testament Jews were strengthened by a promise, so also were the Jews in Christ's day. We might sometimes think that the followers of Jesus were moved to follow him because they saw his great power and miracles. In John's account Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, he mentions that the people who received Christ here had heard that Jesus brought Lazarus back to life.

But the people in the text did not receive Christ here, simply because they had heard of his power. For who else frequently saw Jesus' power, but rejected him fiercely? The Pharisees. No, it was not because of Jesus' powers, but because of the *promises about Jesus*, that the Jews received him. The promises showed them that Jesus was the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament Scriptures. That's why they're singing quotations from Psalm 118 to him. That Psalm, with the rest of the Scriptures, that is, all of the promises of the Old Testament, moved them to receive Christ in faith.

And what was true for the Old Testament Jews, and the Jews of Christ's day, is still true for you and for me. *God creates faith in our hearts by the promises of his grace.* Our Christian life begins with a promise made in Baptism, that we are God's children. Our Christian life continues with the promises of the Word, that reveal Christ and his grace. Our Christian life continues still with the promises of the Lord's Supper, Christ's own body and blood, the sure pledge and promise of the forgiveness of our sins.

The Holy Spirit works faith in us, according to what kind of creatures we are. We are physical creatures. We have bodies. And so the Spirit uses physical, or bodily signs to work faith in us: the waters of baptism joined with the Word; the bread and the wine, joined with Christ's body and blood. And we are mental creatures. We have thoughts and communicate with language. So the Spirit uses human language to communicate God's Word to us, to renew our mind and our thinking. These are God's promises to us: the sacraments, physical signs joined to the Word, and the oral Word of God, written in Scripture and preached in the church.

The Jews' of Zechariah's day, the Jews of Christ's day, and we ourselves have faith in the true God, because of the promises he gave us.

But we sometimes might feel that promisees aren't enough. Especially when life gets hard, and we are filled with doubts, we might ask God for some powerful sign to assure

us. And it sometimes happens that people get greatly troubled or disappointed when they are not given that powerful sign.

Now, it's true, of course: God is powerful. And at times he shows his power in special ways. But here's the thing: *God's power by itself doesn't create faith.*

Remember Pharaoh, who saw Moses' miracles. He knew Moses was God's prophet. But did he turn to the true God? No! He hardened himself against him.

Remember the kings of Canaan, who saw that God was with Israel. Did they let Israel have their promised inheritance? Did they submit to the true God? No! They fought against Israel and their God.

It's not by demonstrations of his power, but by promises of grace, that God has always worked faith in the hearts of his people. Adam and Eve fall into sin. And what does God do? He gives them a promise: "Your seed, O Eve, will crush the serpent's head." God's people are in slavery in Egypt. And what does he say to Moses, before he performed miracles through him? **"I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt"** (Exodus 3:17).

And not only Scripture, but also nature shows that it is not by power that anyone comes to faith in God. For nature shows God's power for everyone in the world to see. Look at the sun, the stars, the moon. Look at the mountains and the oceans. And yet not all people believe in God. Now we see nature, and we look at God's great power, and are often moved to wonder. But this is so, because we have received the promises of God's word: that he who made the world and the universe, is mindful of us, and cares for us (Psalm 8).

But wouldn't it be good for me if God showed me his power? Wouldn't that really stir up faith in my heart? Not necessarily.

Because history shows us that demonstrations of God's power often create fear in our heart. Because they tend to remind us of God's wrath for sin. Israel gathered around Mt. Sinai to receive the law—they don't want to come anywhere near the mountain, because they heard the thunder, they saw the lightning of God. Jesus calls his first disciples, and tells them to lay down their net on the other side of the boat. They obey and obtain an incredible catch of fish. Peter sees the miracle, and tells Christ to depart from him, for he was a sinful man.

That's why God strengthens our faith through promises. Promises don't produce fear, but peace, and happiness. For they relay to us God's mercy. And they show us that God isn't one to be feared or dreaded, but to be loved and trusted. It's by his promises that we realize that God is our Father. That he's saved us through his Son, Jesus. That we receive the Holy Spirit and all his comfort.

Remember the prophet Elijah. He flees for his life away from evil queen Jezebel. He's hiding alone in a cave. He's scared and thinks he's the only faithful believer left. And the

Lord comes to him. He makes a great wind pass by, he causes an earthquake, he causes a great fire, but Scripture says that the Lord was not in any of those things. But then there comes a quiet whisper, where the Lord speaks to Elijah, and he promises to him: “Elijah, you are not alone. Go back and keep preaching. I’ve got thousands of faithful people still left.” So Elijah was strengthened not by power, but by a quiet promise.

So we find ourselves alone, fleeing from the terrors of this life. And how is it that God comforts you and me, to strengthen us to keep going? “You’re not alone. I’m with you. You can be sure of this, because of what I did through my Son, Jesus. Since he’s taken away your sins, by his life and death, I’ll always be with you, as a Father. I promise.”

So our faith is created by the word of a promise. And faith responds to this promise. We see this illustrated in the crowds’ reception of Christ.

The crowds sing cheerfully to their king. “Save us,” they say, “Son of David and King of Israel.” They don’t fear him at all. They don’t hide in their homes, as before a fearful general. They lay everything before his feet. He rides over them on his donkey and tramples them down.

So the Christian heart cries out to Christ with joy and thanksgiving by faith. We’re God’s people, and we’ve received such wonderful promises from him. And therefore, we speak to Christ, the one promised to us. And in this speaking to Christ, by prayer, by thanksgiving, by singing in hymns and songs, we practice in part what we will experience in fullness in Christ’s kingdom: speaking to God, face to face.

We can do this because we have no fear of God in Christ. Instead we lay everything before him. All of sins, all of our guilt, all of our shame, all of our terrors of life and of death. And he tramples them under his feet as our Savior and King. That’s the kind of king Christ is. A king who promises grace to us to strengthen our faith. Our king in whom we have no fear of God, but sing and rejoice. For by his entrance into Jerusalem—by his life and death *for you*—he has delivered you from the bonds of sin, death, and the devil forever. Amen.

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