

Sermon Text (Matthew 21:1–9 ESV)

¹ Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.”
⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵ “Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Jesus Surpasses Our Expectations

For children, one of the most torturous things in the world, if not the most torturous thing in the world, is waiting to open their presents on Christmas morning. They want to open them as soon as possible, but their parents always seem to find another reason to make them wait longer: the family has to go to church first; the entire family has to be gathered around the tree; dad has to find the camera so that he can take pictures. So, as the kids wait to open their presents, they pass the time by trying to figure out what’s inside them: they look at the size of their presents; pick them up to see how heavy they are; shake them to see if they can hear anything inside that could give them a clue. And sometimes, by the end of their investigation, they think they’ve found out what at least one of their presents is, and it’s something that they’ve wanted for a long time. So, when the time finally comes for them to open that present, they excitedly rip the paper off, open the box, and . . . it’s not what they thought it was after all.

Like children waiting to open their Christmas presents, the people of Israel built up their expectations for what the promised Messiah would be like when he eventually came. And, if kids

think that it's torturous to have to wait to open their presents for an hour or two at the most, the people of Israel had to wait thousands of years for the Messiah to arrive. As they waited, they looked at the prophecies in Scripture that spoke of his coming and interpreted them in an incorrect way. Since many of the prophecies described the coming Messiah as a mighty king who would save his people, the people of Israel looked at their current situation, being forced to live under Roman rule, and interpreted those prophecies to mean that the coming Messiah would be a mighty earthly king who would overthrow the Romans and give their nation back to them.

Because of the expectations that the people of Israel had, they probably expected the Messiah to come in majesty. But how did he come instead? He wasn't born in a magnificent palace, but in a stable, with a manger, a feeding trough for animals, for his bed. Who were the first ones to behold him? Not kings, but lowly shepherds. Where did he grow up? Not in an important city like Jerusalem, but in the lowly town of Nazareth, a place that was looked down upon for being inferior in education and culture. Whom did he associate himself with? Not with mighty soldiers and the important religious leaders, but with lowly fishermen and those whom the religious leaders considered to be sinners.

But now, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, had the perfect opportunity to finally present himself as the majestic king that he truly is. Jesus knew that this was the last Sunday before he would die an innocent death on the cross, and so, as he prepared to ride into Jerusalem for the last time, he could have done so on the back of a horse, wearing flowing purple robes and a glistening crown. But what did he ride in on instead? On a lowly donkey. And it wasn't that there were no other animals available that he could have ridden on. Jesus specifically asked his disciples to bring a donkey and her colt to him, which he did to fulfill the prophecy that was spoken by the prophet

Zechariah: “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden’” (verse 5).

Because of the humble way in which Jesus came on Palm Sunday, as well as the humility that he lived in throughout the rest of his earthly life, it was clear that he was not showing off his majesty in the way that the people of Israel expected the Messiah to. But they had not given up hope just yet. Even though Jesus had not yet shown his power and might by confronting the Roman rulers, he showed his power and might through the countless miracles that he performed throughout his ministry. Surely, he intended to use this power to save them from the Romans. So, as he humbly rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, the people of Israel praised him and shouted, “Hosanna,” which means, “Save us now!”

But then came Jesus’ ultimate humiliation. On Maundy Thursday, he was betrayed by Judas, one of his own disciples, and handed over to the Romans, who mocked and tortured him before ultimately putting him to death. Jesus did not shed the blood of the Romans; instead, his own blood was shed by them. He did not wear a glistening crown on his head; instead, he wore a crown of thorns. Where were those who were praising him on Palm Sunday now? At least some of them had turned on him and were the ones who were telling the Romans to put him to death. It had become plain to them that Jesus was not the Messiah that they were hoping for.

But little did the people of Israel know that, by his ultimate humiliation, his innocent suffering and death, Jesus gave them a far greater gift than salvation from the Romans. He gave them salvation from their sins. He may not have established a kingdom on earth for the people of Israel, which would have been only temporary, but, by the shedding of his innocent blood, he did open the gates of the kingdom of heaven to them, a kingdom that has no end. So long as the people of Israel believed in Jesus as their Savior, their promised Messiah, that eternal kingdom

would be theirs. And many of them eventually did come to faith in him through the preaching of his Word.

But this gift is not just for the people of Israel. It's also for the entire rest of world, including you. The mocking and torture that Jesus endured was for you. The sins that Jesus took on himself were your sins. The blood that Jesus shed on the cross was for you, so that the price of all of your sins was paid. He suffered the ultimate humiliation on the cross so that the gates of heaven would be opened to you. But how does Jesus bring this gift to you? He does so through humble means: the means of grace, his Word and Sacraments.

Instead of mighty angels descending from the heavens and declaring to the entire world that Jesus is the promised Messiah and that we are to put our faith in him and do as he has commanded us to do, God sends humble pastors out into all the world to preach his Word to them and teach them what God wants them to believe and do. Instead of putting us through a baptism by fire, in which we are put through a challenging trial that results in us proving our faith to him in the end, God gives us a baptism through water, in which he brings us to faith and washes our sins away by the application of water and the speaking of his Word. Instead of preparing a magnificent feast for the entire world to eat that will satisfy all of their earthly hunger, God prepares a humble feast of bread and wine, in which, through the speaking of his Word, we feast on the true body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

The world looks at the humble ways in which Jesus comes to us and thinks that they're foolishness. If God really wanted us to believe in him, he would show greater displays of his power and might: he would end world hunger and poverty, making sure that everyone had enough money and food to satisfy their earthly needs; he would bring an end to all of the wars and violence in the world and usher in an era of world peace; he would guarantee that everyone

gets to go to heaven by either wiping out all sin from the world or forgiving everyone of their sins, regardless of whether they are repentant of their sins and believe in him or not. The world expects God to behave in the way that they think he should behave, and, because he doesn't, they don't want to have anything to do with him and want him out of their lives.

Even we can have our own false expectations for how God should behave. We may not go as far as some of the people of this world do, but there are times when we may think that, if God is really as powerful as he says that he is, why doesn't he always give us the weather that we want? Why does he sometimes put people in control of the government who fix our country's problems and other times put people in control of the government who appear to only increase our country's problems? Why doesn't he heal our loved ones who are suffering from pain and sickness? The apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). However, we are tempted to think that, if God was really working all things out for the good of those who love him, wouldn't he only give us good things? What did any of us do to deserve the hard times that God puts us through?

We may think that we know what is best for us, but God speaks to us through the prophet Isaiah, "[M]y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9). God alone knows what is best for us, and he gives that to us. He gives us what we need for our earthly lives, as well as for our spiritual lives. And while we are all too often focused solely on our earthly needs and desires, God knows that our spiritual needs (the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation) are the most important things for us. So, he makes them easily accessible to everyone by giving them to us through the means of his Word and

Sacraments. As Jesus comes to us through these humble means to give us his grace, the grace that he won for us by his perfect life and his innocent death, we join in singing the same words that the people of Israel sang as Jesus rode into Jerusalem to give them his grace, “Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest” (*The Sanctus*).

Everything that Jesus did for us is far better than anything we could expect. Through his innocent death on the cross, he paid the price for all our sins. By his resurrection from the dead, he destroyed the power that death had over us. Jesus won the victory for us, and now, that victory is brought to us through the preaching of his Word and through the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The prize that awaits us is greater than anything we can comprehend, and that prize will be ours for all eternity. Jesus, our Messiah, may not have met our false expectations, but by coming to us in humility and giving us the eternal salvation that he won for us on the cross, Jesus surpasses our expectations.