

Text: Matthew 21:1-11. Palm Sunday. **April 13, 2014.**

Grace and peace are yours through our Suffering Savior, Jesus. Amen.

I've always found Palm Sunday to be perplexing. Who is this guy Jesus? Is he the king who knows where to find a donkey, or the poor man who needs to borrow one? Why a donkey? Is he the King as prophesied, or the loser, bloodied and beaten and dying on the cross? Is he worthy of praise words, like, "Hosanna!" or curse words, like, "Crucify!" It doesn't seem like Jesus can be both. It doesn't appear that he can be both king and servant, ruler and gentle. There's a fancy name for these kind of statements that don't seem to be true, but are. The fancy name is paradox, a statement that seems contradictory, but is actually true. Today we are going to ponder some of those Palm Sunday paradoxes. Maybe your head will hurt thinking about these paradoxes. Maybe you won't be able to make sense of these paradoxes, but maybe pondering these paradoxes will increase your faith to say, "What an awesome God we have! Wow is God amazing! Wow! Does Jesus love me!" That's the point of pondering Palm Sunday paradoxes.

Paradox number one: Jesus knows, but he needs. Let me explain. Jesus knows where to find a donkey, in the village ahead of them, where they have not been yet. Jesus knows exactly where the donkey is, both mother and colt. Jesus knows exactly how the conversation will go down when his disciples borrow it. Jesus can tell them exactly what to say ahead of time. Yet, this guy who knows everything needs a donkey. If he's so smart, why doesn't he have his own? Well, actually, there's another paradox. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. It was the Lord who needed this donkey, so the donkey was really just reverting to its rightful owner for a short time. Jesus said in the book of Psalms, "The flocks in the field are mine and the cattle on a thousand hills." And every donkey as well. So Jesus wasn't stealing. He was using what was his. Yet he promises to return this donkey when he is finished with it. Why does he need to do that? Another paradox.

Does your head hurt yet? Jesus knows, but he needs. Jesus knows exactly what lies ahead of him. From this Palm Sunday road he can see the garden of Gethsemane where he will sweat blood, knowing the agony he faces. He knows, but he needs angels to strengthen him. He knows the whip and nails and cross await. Yet he needs the prayers of his disciples. He knows, but he needs. Paradox number one.

Paradox number two: the donkey. The donkey does not appear as a royal animal, fit for a king. The donkey was the humble animal of every day burdens. Think minivan or station wagon. It was a common animal. It wasn't majestic to look at. Not very fast. Not very big. Jesus was riding probably only inches off the ground, especially when you consider he rode not the adult donkey, but the young donkey, the foal, the colt.

And yet, for those with faith, who knew the Bible well, the donkey was the animal of kings. Before Jesus, kings on the Old Testament rode donkeys. The donkey really was the royal animal. God's appointed prophets predicted that God's king would ride a donkey. We read that promise this morning. You see what's behind these paradoxes, what solves the paradoxes is a knowledge of the Bible and the eyes of faith. First God brings you to believe the truth of his Word, then you can see Jesus as the fulfiller of promises. First you believe, then you see. There wasn't much to see on Palm Sunday, just a guy on a donkey. But there was plenty to believe, that this guy is the Savior. That he is the promised one. There's a paradox in the donkey. Ponder it.

There's still more to that donkey, another paradox. We heard this also in the first lesson. The donkey was the animal of peace. It was slow, small, no good for battle. Horses were the animals of war. Donkeys were the animals of peace. Jesus is riding into Jerusalem, the city of peace, to fight the greatest battle ever fought. Jesus is going to war with the devil. Jesus is going to defeat death itself the only way possible: death. And Jesus is going to come out the winner. Jesus is going to defeat the devil and death. He rides into war on an animal of peace. He rides into war to win the ultimate peace: the devil has lost. I'm going to rise. I'm going to live forever. Humble yet royal, peace through war. Paradox in a donkey.

Jesus himself is a paradox on Palm Sunday, a paradox to ponder, paradox number three. Jesus' whole existence is a paradox. The creator became a creature. God became a man. God is God's Son. God's Son is equal to God. Sorry for the headache. Ibuprofen can be provided for those who need it. Everything about Jesus is a paradox. One thing really stands out on Palm Sunday. He's gentle, but a king. Gentle is not what you usually associate with kings. Gentle is mild. Gentle is not thinking about your own self-interest. Gentle is using your abilities for others, not yourself. Gentle means accepting difficulties as God's hand working in your life. That doesn't sound like a king. That's the paradox of Jesus, the gentle king, the ruler of all who suffers for all. The shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander. The master pays the debt his servants owe him. That's gentle king Jesus. That's the paradox.

Allow me to shift, then to another paradox, the paradox of the crowd. This one might hurt your heart more than your head. You've been warned. On Sunday, the crowd is praising Jesus. On Sunday, the people are taking the shirts off their backs to throw them on a dusty donkey and on dirty roads. Throwing clothes on the ground was for a king to walk on. On Sunday, the people are cutting down palm branches and laying them on the road. Palm branches were used for religious festivals and royal processions. On Sunday, the

crowd is acting like Jesus is a king. On Sunday, the crowds are shouting, "Hosanna!" Hosanna is a word that means, "Save us!" You would shout this word as a cry for rescue, a cry to a Savior, a cry to a king, a shout of victory! On Sunday, the crowds didn't stop with Hosanna! They shouted to the Son of David, a special name for the promised Savior. They kept on shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Another way to proclaim this guy, on this donkey as the guy, the Savior, the promised one! On Sunday, they kept on shouting, "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" This was as much praise as Jesus ever got on earth from people. On Sunday, Palm Sunday. On Tuesday, the crowds challenged Jesus with questions. On Thursday, his disciples all deserted him and ran at the first sign of trouble. On Friday, these same huge crowds had a different shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

I pray that makes your heart hurt. And don't just hurt for those terrible people back then who yelled, "Hosanna!" on Sunday and, "Crucify!" on Friday. My heart hurts for me. Because I have done exactly the same. On Sunday, I'm praising Jesus and singing loud and I just can't get enough. But have you ever thought, even on Sunday, that 60 minutes is enough? It doesn't even take until Monday that we are yelling, "Crucify!" A couple of Sundays ago, vicar wonderfully pointed to Jesus as the one who turns our world upside down by seeing serving others as the greatest joy. Sunday afternoon I had to pull my own socks out of the dryer. I did not do that with joy. No one else in my family has to work on Sunday. Why can't they get off their lazy butts and do it. Yes, your pastor is standing in that crowd, yelling, "Crucify!" And so are you. On Tuesday, will you challenge Jesus with your questions when the car breaks down and there isn't money to fix it? Crucify! On Thursday, will you desert Jesus by grumbling about three church services in four days? Crucify! On Friday, will going out with friends sound better than going with Jesus to the cross? Crucify!

Thank God Jesus gave us the medicine for that heartache. That medicine is the cross. Jesus died for those who yelled crucify, even that person I see in the mirror. That cross has the blood of the one who loved you so much, this much, he stretched out his arms and died. That's the king on that cross. I know that's another paradox. But that's the king, making everything new, restoring your relationship status not just to friend, but to perfect friend, friend I want to be with forever. And Jesus is not fickle like the crowds, like us. Jesus is constant. Jesus is faithful. Jesus will never abandon you. That cross is some powerful medicine. And for those who need something a little more personal, we have that, too. Jesus' own body and Jesus' own blood, given for you and poured out for you. Your sins, just yours, you personally, are forgiven. You personally are clean. You personally are perfect. That's some powerful medicine, given by a powerful physician of souls. Powerful medicine that is another paradox. Bread and wine do all that? Bread and wine wash away sin? Believe it. Then you'll see it. Ponder it. Then you'll appreciate it.

So that only leaves us one paradox left to ponder: the question from the startled, shaken crowds. "Who is this?" That's a question only you can answer for yourself. The religious elite answered with, "A deceiver, a law breaker." Some of the crowds got lost in the humility and said, "A guy on a donkey. Not worth it." Some in the crowd got swept up in the Sunday excitement and said, "He's a prophet," and followed the Friday crowd in yelling, "Crucify!" Who is this? A paradox. A king who knows, yet who needs, a royal king riding on a humble donkey, a king who brings peace through war, a gentle king, the promised King, the King who loved to love those who loved to hate him, yet kept on loving them all the way to the cross. There's a paradox to ponder. Amen.