

Advent 1 - Matthew 21:1-9

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Christ's First Advent: His Coming As Messiah

If I were to ask you what Mary, as she was with child, rode into the city on, what would you say? A donkey? Scripture never says that. It's legend. A lot of these kind of details were accepted early on in Christianity as the popular depiction, which is why our Nativity scenes and plays often depict Mary riding on a donkey. It's a nice picture, we like seeing Mary on a donkey.

Our "American Christmas" which is a secular holiday spanning from Thanksgiving to December 25th is a season of seeing. The lights, the colors, the presents, the decorations, even the holiday pageants. Everything depends on our senses. But Advent, which is the Christian season starting today and going to December 24th, is a time not of seeing, but hearing. Hearing by faith.

So this Advent we will take our focus off of those things which we can see. We'll take our focus off of all the visible distractions and focus on the promises of God revealed through what we hear in Scripture.

This morning we do hear Jesus riding on a donkey, but at a different time. Please stand as I read these words in Jesus' name.

Matthew 21:1-9

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²telling them, "Go to the village ahead of you. Immediately you will find a donkey tied there along with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, you are to say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

⁶The disciples went and did just as Jesus commanded them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their outer clothing on them, and he sat on it. ⁸A very large crowd spread their outer clothing on the road. Others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them out on the road. ⁹The crowds who went in front of him and those who followed kept shouting,

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

So what does a donkey have to do with Advent? What does this lesson at all have to do with Advent. This is Palm Sunday. This Palm Sunday lesson actually has been the historic Gospel

lesson since about the year 400 A.D. It's the reason why so many of our Advent hymns include the phrase "Hosanna in the Highest." So why would this Palm Sunday lesson be so important to hear by believers year after year at the start of Advent?

Because at Advent, we need to know who is coming. We as Christians living two thousand years after the birth of Christ, have the privilege of looking back at Christmas, the day when Christ was born. But we are no different than those Christians who lived two thousand years before Christ was born, who looked ahead. And when they looked ahead, they did so through prophecies such as from Zechariah: "Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9).

When He first comes, that is, when He is born in the world, this is what He will be:

1. He will be your King.
2. He will be humble, riding on a donkey.

A King is coming? That's exciting. Anything to do with royalty is glorious and magnificent. In the news lately is the "coming soon" wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Everyone is excited because the ceremony will be such a great sight, full of pomp and circumstance - and Harry isn't even a King, he's just a prince, and Meghan has no royal blood. And yet, that wedding when it comes will look glorious. This King? He's the King of the World. When He comes, certainly He will be much more glorious, right? Wrong.

But that's exactly what the people on Palm Sunday thought. They sang Psalm 118, "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*" "Hosanna" is a Hebrew word which means "save us now." In the context of Psalm 118, the saving that this King would do would be the saving of the world through His sacrificial death. But the saving the people had in mind when they sang this was quite different. When they sang "Hosanna," they called on Him to "hosanna," "save us now" from the Romans. They were looking for a king who would "make Israel great again" and save them from the Romans and earthly hardship. They were looking for a messiah who would be an *earthly* king. They didn't understand who was coming. In fact, Jesus actually cries before this section of Scripture because they didn't understand His coming/Advent.

Is this any different than today? Who do we think the King is that's coming? Is He a king that's coming in glory? Is He a king who will make our lives better if we follow Him? Is He a king who will make our country great? Is He a king who will make it a white Christmas, give us presents, and fill us with holiday cheer? Is He a king who will tell you that you are a decent person and because of that, give you His blessing?

If any of these are the king we are looking for, we have replaced Advent and Christ-mas with nothing other than a secular holiday season. We've let our senses dictate what we want our King to be: glorious.

But what King *is* coming? The one actually prophesied by Zechariah: "Tell the daughter of Zion: Look, your King comes to you, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9).

The same people on Palm Sunday would shout "Hosannas," later reject him as their king just five days later on Good Friday. They said "we have no king but caesar; crucify Him!" because He wasn't the King they wanted; He wasn't the King that appealed to their senses. And so He was crucified, with an inscription above His head that said "Jesus Christ, King of the Jews" to mock Him. They didn't understand His coming, His advent.

But in spite of their sin and misunderstanding, God fulfilled what He had promised long ago. This King would now save His people. He would save them, by becoming humble. He wasn't a King that would stay all cute and cuddly in a manger; rather nails, spear, would pierce Him through.

This is the King who was coming: The King who is humble. He would be born to an unmarried woman, perceived by the people around her to be in sin. This is the King: One who would have nowhere to lay His head, being born in a barn for animals. This is the King: The all-powerful God who is above the Law because He created it, and yet a King who would suffer under the law under a mere local official to whom He gave authority, Pontius Pilate. This is the King: One who would be sentenced to death and killed in the most excruciating way possible: being hung as the worst of criminals by nails on a tree. This is the King: One who was crucified, died, and buried, as of no importance to the world.

This is *our* King. His first Advent, His coming into the world, was not with great sights and wonders. Even the star didn't appear until after His birth. Christ's first Advent: His Coming As Messiah, was His coming in humility, signified by riding a donkey and a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Why does this matter? Why couldn't Christ's birth have been glorious? Why can't Christmas be all about the sights and the glory?

Think about the coming wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, for a minute. That will be a glorious spectacular event. If you wanted to go, how close could you get? Probably as close as sitting in front of your TV. You aren't royalty. You have no right to be in the presence of royalty. That's how royalty works; in order for someone to be royal, high and mighty, someone else has to be lowly and humble. Unfortunately, that means you and I are lowly, they are exalted.

If Christ came into the world as royalty; if He "arrived with trumpets and lain in a cradle of gold, His birth would have been a splendid affair. But it wouldn't have been a comfort to [us]. We wouldn't be able to get near Him, we would still be humble and lowly. Instead, Christ "lied in the lap of a poor maiden and was of little significance in the eyes of the world." He came humbly, He was laid in a cradle of hay, He rode into the city on a donkey, He died on a cross. Because of this, "Now [we] can come to Him."¹

He becomes humble so we can be exalted. He's born in a manger so we can be reborn into heaven. He dies so that we can live. This is our King. This is His first coming: His coming as our humble Messiah, our meek and righteous Savior and King.

He "saves us now" not because He's mighty, but because He is lowly. So this Advent, sing your carols of the season, but also sing your Hosannas. Decorate with bows of holly, but also wave your palm branches. Put Mary riding a donkey in your nativity scene, but also remember Christ riding lowly on a donkey into Jerusalem to die.

¹ Martin Luther, Christmas Sermon

Because our King isn't a glorious King, He's a humble King who saved us. Advent isn't about all the splendor you can see as the world celebrates the season. It's about the promises of God revealed in Scripture, including the promise that the Messiah will come from David. We will be saved because we will be called righteous (Jer. 33:16) because our Messiah and God became humble.

Hosanna to this Son of David! Hosanna in the highest! Amen.