

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Matthew 21:1-11

Before moving to Lemmon, I pastored a small Christian congregation in Southwest Florida for seven years. For six of those years I lived in Winter Haven, FL, and drove two hundred miles roundtrip each Sunday to conduct worship services in North Port, FL. When people learned of this commute, they inevitably asked, “Don’t you tire of that drive?” And I truthfully answered, “No, not really.” Actually, I enjoyed the drive. During the two hours to North Port, I focused on my sermon. During the two-hour return to Winter Haven, I relaxed, listened to the radio or a novel on CD; or even began to think about the sermon text for the following Sunday.

For me, the real challenge of the drive was not the time or distance but the familiarity. After seven years and more than three hundred and sixty-four roundtrips, I knew every road, every turn, every stop sign and traffic signal, every REPENT poster nailed to a telephone pole, and every small town along the Highway 17 corridor running north and south through central Florida: Eagle Lake, Bartow, Fort Meade, Bowling Green, Wachula, Zolfo Springs, Gardner, Brownville, Arcadia, Fort Ogden. The monotonous regularity of a train on its track. Clicket-clack. Clickety-clack.

After a while, I no longer saw these towns. I simply passed through them. The anticipation was gone; the scenery, dim; the landscape, a blur. The only surprises were unexpected detours and accidents and road construction. I drove. I arrived. I returned. And in a way, the monotony of the journey was sad, and at times even dangerous. There were many things, important things, I missed along the way because I was no longer paying attention to the roads.

All of this made me wonder: Could the same be true of that old, familiar road we travel each Palm Sunday; the two-mile stretch from Bethany and Bethphage, down the slope of the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and into the ancient city of Jerusalem? How many times have we traveled this road via Scripture?

After all, the Scripture readings for Palm Sunday are invariably the same: Zechariah 9:9-10; Philippians 2:5-11; and Matthew 21:1-11 or any of the other parallel accounts of the Triumphant Entry. Likewise, the hymns for Palm Sunday are often the same: “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna,” LH:161; “Ride On, Ride On, in Majesty,” LH:162. The route is the same. The towns are the same. The crowds, donkeys, palm branches, garments, and hosannas are the same. The Pharisees always complain about the praises and acclamations. Jesus always weeps over Jerusalem; and upon entering the city, always drives the moneychangers from the temple. Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack. Like a train on its track.

Consequently, the temptation is to travel this Palm Sunday Road with the same sleepy familiarity with which I once traveled the roads between Winter Haven and North Port. And yet, dear friends, to do so is to deprive ourselves of great comfort. For that which occurred on that first Palm Sunday was of such importance that, when the Pharisees objected to the hosannas and hallelujahs and shouts of **“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD,”** Jesus replied: **“I tell you, if they should keep silent, the stones will cry out,”** Luke 19:40. Stones crying out. At what? At the significance of Jesus Christ riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

So yes, to quote the title of a popular Willie Nelson song, we are **“ON THE ROAD AGAIN”**. But this is no meaningless road; and we dare not travel it without seeing it. Because for Jesus Christ, that Palm Sunday Road was a road of fulfillment, a road of personal involvement, and a road of humility. Let’s examine these.

First, a road of fulfillment. On the Saturday before Palm Sunday, Jesus and His disciples were in Bethany where, among other things, they had dinner at the home of Simon the Leper. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were in attendance. During this meal, Mary anointed Jesus with expensive perfume worth an entire year’s wages. When Judas Iscariot hypocritically complained about the ‘waste’, Jesus replied: **“Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to Me. When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial,”** Matthew 26:10,12. That same Saturday, a large crowd gathered in Bethany; not only to see Jesus, but also to see Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

The next day, Palm Sunday, while still in Bethany, Jesus told two of His disciples to go to the nearby village of Bethphage, where they would find a donkey and a colt. They were to untie the animals and bring them to Jesus. And if the owners objected, the disciples were simply to say, **“The Lord needs them.”**

Later, seated on the foal of the donkey, Jesus began His triumphant ride into Jerusalem. As He left, the large crowd in Bethany followed. An even larger crowd from Jerusalem met Jesus along the way. And as one multitude—thousands, perhaps tens of thousands—they broke into joyful song. They waved palm branches. They paved the road with garments. They shouted loud hosannas: **“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”**

Luke’s Gospel adds this description: **“When He came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen,”** Luke 19:37. And it was likely here, at this location, as the road opened suddenly into a panoramic view of Jerusalem, that Jesus paused, wept, and said, **“If you, even you, had only**

known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes,” Luke 19:42. And according to Matthew 21:10, when Jesus finally entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred.

These were the events of Palm Sunday. And we know them with the familiarity of a train on its track. Clicket-clack. But why did these events happen? Were they merely coincidental? Was it a coincidence that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on the very day Israelites chose a spotless lamb for their Passover sacrifice? Was it a coincidence that Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey, more precisely, the colt of a donkey; and not on a camel or by foot or in a gleaming gold war-chariot pulled by prancing white stallions? Was it a coincidence that children sang Palm Sunday praises to Jesus in the temple area? No. None of these events were coincidences or happenstances or accidents. They were ordained by God. They occurred in order to fulfill Scripture.

And so we read in Matthew 21:4-5, **“This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet.”** And then, in explaining, Matthew quoted from Zechariah 9:9-10, our first Scripture reading for this Palm Sunday: **“Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your King comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’ ”**

Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem on that day, in that way, because Scripture decreed that this would happen. And it did happen exactly as prophesied, because Almighty God takes His Word and His Promises seriously. And dear friends, so should we. In fact, amid this crazed, chaotic world, where dreams turn to nightmares and the best of intentions become the worst of circumstances, can there be any greater comfort than knowing that God is *always* faithful; that God *always* fulfills His promises; that God *always* keeps His Word to the very last paragraph, sentence, word, letter, and punctuation mark?

On Palm Sunday, the road Jesus took from Bethany and Bethphage, down the slope of the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and into the city of Jerusalem was first and foremost a road of fulfillment. God came to save us, just as God promised He would: from that first promise of a Savior in Eden; to all the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament and their complete fulfillment in the New Testament; including even the last promise Jesus Himself made in the last book of the Bible, **“Yes, I am coming soon,”** He said in Revelation 22:20. And He will keep this promise too. Soon.

Throughout the Bible we often read phases like “this happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.” This happened. Like Palm Sunday happened. Like Jesus riding on a donkey happened. Like children singing Palm Sunday praises to Jesus

happened. **“Do you hear what these children are saying?”** demanded the Pharisees. They were indignant. **“Yes,”** replied Jesus, **“have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants You have ordained praise’?”** Matthew 21:16.

Yet, in a real sense, doesn't this same phrase, “this happened that the Scriptures might be fulfilled,” apply to our daily lives? When we sin, yet turn to God in repentance and faith, He always forgives us *because He said He would*—“so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.” When we go through heartache and difficulties, God always delivers us *because He said He would*—“so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.” When we ask God for the wisdom to make right choices or the strength to press on or the peace of mind that can only come from the Gospel, He always gives us these blessings *because He said He would*—“so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.” We learn this lesson while ON THE ROAD AGAIN, unless we're walking it without seeing it.

Second, a road of personal involvement. Over His life and ministry, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem many times. At the age of eight days to be circumcised. At the age of twelve years to converse with learned theologians in the temple. He went to Jerusalem for Passovers and festivals, to teach about the Kingdom of God and Himself as its King. Yet, on Palm Sunday, the journey Jesus made to Jerusalem was decidedly different—not merely because the road was covered with palm branches and garments and lined with joyful celebrants singing loud hosannas. No, this journey to Jerusalem was different for Jesus because it was His last journey and the end of His redemptive work.

On Palm Sunday, the road from Bethany and Bethphage to Jerusalem was a one way road with one divinely-appointed destination: the cross. And this is what we must see as we walk the road with Jesus, waving our palms, singing our hosannas. Jesus Christ, the Lord of All, the Creator of the Universe, the One called **“Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,”** Isaiah 9:6, rode a donkey to Jerusalem to suffer and die for the sins of the world. My sins. Your sins. Our sins.

Because if we were to be saved, He had to die. This He explained to His disciples several times, including these words from Matthew 20: **“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life.”** Can we picture Jesus, our Jesus, slowly riding toward Jerusalem with the city in view and the cross in mind; or in the words of the hymnist, riding on “in lowly pomp to die”?

Today, your heart may be heavy with worries and concerns. You may be facing insurmountable difficulties: a frightening illness, a troubled marriage, serious debt, doubts, fears, loss, depression, family issues. You may be wondering, “Does God really care about me? Is He aware of what is happening to me? Is He personally, intimately, and actively involved in my life?” The answer, of course, is YES. Yes, He does care. Yes, He does know. Yes, He is involved. Did He not make you? Did He not form You in your mother’s womb? Did He not choose you in eternity and call you to faith in time? Most of all, did He not redeem You through the sacrifice of His own Son, Jesus Christ?

If you want irrefutable, undeniable, and unchangeable proof of God’s PERSONAL involvement in your daily life and daily problems, simply remember where that Palm Sunday Road led Jesus—a road He walked deliberately, committedly, determinedly, and gladly. That Palm Sunday Road led Jesus Christ to the cross, where He suffered and died for your sins. And friend, God cannot get more personally involved in your life than that. What is more personal than Jesus Christ giving His life for yours? We learn this lesson while ON THE ROAD AGAIN, unless we’re walking it without seeing it.

Third and finally, a road of humility. And oh, such humility. Many religions are willing to call Jesus Christ a good man or a mighty prophet or even a son of God: Mormonism, Islam, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hinduism, Buddhism, and a host of other religions and isms. But they are not willing to call Jesus truly and fully God. Perhaps partly God. Perhaps sort of God. Perhaps God with training wheels. But not true God.

Many of the people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday undoubtedly felt the same. As reported in Matthew 21:10-11, **“When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’** Some saw a good man. Others saw a prophet. Still others saw a miracle-worker, a straight-talker, and a potential Roman-ouster. But how many saw God riding on a donkey, a lowly beast of burden?

Paul wrote in Philippians 2:5-11, our second Scripture reading for today: **“Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of JESUS every knee should bow, in heaven**

and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

An abundance of Scripture verses testify to Christ’s deity. Romans 9:5, **“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised.”** Or Colossians 2:9, **“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”** Or Titus 2:13, **“Looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”** There are many other passages too; but how many do we need?

Understanding who Jesus was and is, namely, true God from all eternity, enables us to better understand the extent to which He humbled Himself for our sakes. God riding a donkey. God embracing the cross. God coming to us lovingly, tenderly, gently, in His desire that, through the Gospel, all might be saved and come to Him.

Outside of Mark Twain’s fictional story, *The Prince and the Pauper*, how many factual rulers and dignitaries would be willing to lay aside the glory, fame, and wealth to which they were rightfully entitled in order to selflessly serve others? A king? A president? A senator? A famous celebrity? Yet, this Jesus did. And Jesus is God.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,” wrote Paul. And nothing more really needs to be said about our Christian attitude toward others, does it? Christ did not insist on what was rightfully His. Christ did not come to be served but to serve. Christ did not place His needs before the needs of others. Christ spared no expense in doing what needed to be done. And then Paul writes: **“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”**

Christ’s attitude was one of absolute, abject humility; a willingness to sacrifice Himself in order to save each one of us. And this too we learn while ON THE ROAD AGAIN, unless we’re walking it without seeing it.

Like a train on its track. Clickety-clack.