

Can't Stop the Praises

Luke 19:28-40 (NIV)

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here." ³¹ If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" say, "The Lord needs it." ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They replied, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ 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: ³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" ⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is not coming via ordinary means like walking. He is coming on a colt, the foal of a donkey, one that has never been ridden. People are spreading out their cloaks on the road for Jesus and his colt to walk on. Palm branches are cut by the people. Some are put down on the road with their cloaks, rolling out the red carpet for Jesus. Others wave the palm branches as Jesus comes by, a sign of victory. The crowd praises Jesus. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (verse 38) "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (verse 38) "Hosanna!" "Save us!" Jesus is welcomed to Jerusalem as a king.

What caused this impromptu Palm Sunday parade? Was this something where monkey see, monkey do – that the crowd simply got swept up in the emotions of the event and joined in with what others were doing? Did the people have in mind the prophecy from Zechariah: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9) or did they think of King David showing his successor by putting Solomon on his mule? Did they understand what Jesus was about to do, how he truly was their king?

Luke tells us the reason why people participated in welcoming Jesus. "The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen." (verse 37) Jesus was known for his miracles. He was hailed as a prophet because of them. Wouldn't we do the same? This man raised Lazarus, a man who had been dead for four days, a man who had been shut in a tomb. And Lazarus wasn't the first person he raised from the dead. Jesus had raised two others as well. He had recently given sight to a blind beggar. He had removed the infectious skin disease of leprosy from ten people. And there were so many more miracles. Because of what they had seen Jesus do, the people knew that Jesus was worthy of their praise.

But not everyone felt that way. Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" (verse 39) Stop them from praising you! They shouldn't be doing this!

Should the people have welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem the way that they did? Knowing what happens the rest of the week, how some were probably part of the crowd calling for his crucifixion, these people were either very fickle or were praising Jesus for the wrong reasons, that they truly didn't understand what he had come to do and the people praising him had their hearts in the wrong place.

Maybe we don't think about this very often, but Jesus didn't need the crowd to welcome him and praise him like this. Jesus didn't need the people to cut palm branches and shout the phrases: "Hosanna" "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" What Jesus needed was that colt, that foal of a donkey. He needed to ride in on that donkey to fulfill what had been said by the prophet Zechariah. The people's praises were not a command of the prophecy.

In fact, God does not need our praises to be God, to keep his promises. He did not create human beings so that he would have someone who would admire his work. He didn't need people because he was lonely. God is all sufficient in and of himself.

Then what are we doing here praising him? Why did we bother getting palms for today? Why bother waving them about? Why bother having the Sunday School kids up to sing? If God does not need our praises, should we have just stayed home, not bothered with church?

Do you ever get to that place where you are questioning, “What is the point in coming to church?” I mean, obviously, you have continued to come, but does coming to church just feel like you are going through the motions, doing something that you have made a habit, something that you know you should do? Do you come to church out of obligation, almost as if you think God won’t love you or bless you if you don’t come?

Coming to church out of obligation is not what God wants of us. Church is not supposed to be a chore, an item that I need to check off of my to-do list. If we treat it as such, we are not only missing the point of why we congregate as a group of believers, but we are turning to ourselves for our salvation, as if doing “church” will keep me right with God. If these are the reasons to come to church, then we have come to worship ourselves, not God. Then the songs are just for us to make us feel good about ourselves. The sermons are just pep talks to make me feel better. God does not desire and he does not need this kind of worship.

Even though God does need our worship, he knows that worship is going to happen. This is why Jesus replied to the Pharisees who told him to rebuke the crowd praising him by saying, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (verse 40) You cannot stop the praises. Even if people don’t praise me, then the stones will because all of creation has been subjected to the frustration of man’s choice to rebel against God, to sin. All of creation, the plants, the animals, the mountains, the plains, the sky, the sun, moon, and stars, yes, even the stones, have been looking forward to this day when I would come as King, “righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9) Creation has been looking forward to being liberated from the bondage of sin’s decay and brought into the freedom that comes with the forgiveness of sins. (Romans 8:21) I have come to Jerusalem on this Sunday to march into the final battle against sin. What I will do in the following days will bring peace to all nations. I will conquer sin, death, and the power of the devil. All creation – all humankind as well as all of nature – will rejoice because I will be victorious. You can’t stop the praises because if man will not sing out, then the stones will because they know I’m here to liberate even them.

Jesus didn’t come just to liberate nature from the bondage of sin’s decay; he came to do that for us, for all people. We see the start of his plan today, that over 500 years before he was born of Mary, God instructed Zechariah to foretell of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus foretold of the colt that his disciples would find. He told his disciples in advance the question that would be asked of them and gave them the answer that they should respond with. It all happened just as Jesus planned. He planned and carried out Palm Sunday for us to see him fulfill what was written about him. This means that everything else that happened to him during Holy Week and Easter was exactly as he planned it to be. There was no chance involved. This was God’s will.

Not only do we see the miracle of Jesus fulfilling prophecy, but we also see him do miracles in our lives to liberate us from the bondage of sin’s decay and to become God’s own child. He performed the miracle of baptism on us, a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, that in these waters, he drown our sinful nature, killing it off, freeing us from its clutches. In the miracle of baptism, he clothed us with the kingly robes of his righteousness. Because of this miracle, God looks at us now and no longer sees sinful decay, but he sees our King’s perfection covering us. Jesus performed another miracle for us in his Supper, that his body and his blood was given and poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins, that every time I partake in that holy supper I am cleansed and strengthened in the righteousness and holiness that Christ has given me. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are miracles of forgiveness, God’s gift to us. The war against sin, our sin, was won. Christ our King has conquered our sinful nature and brought us peace with God. Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!

We don’t come to church because we have to. We come to church because we can’t contain praising our King who has liberated us from the bondage of sin’s decay. We can’t stop the praises. We praise him for everything he has done for us. We praise him for all he will do for us. We praise him for the miracle of our salvation, that he is the fulfillment of the promised conquering king who came on a donkey. We are victorious in the battle against sin because he has conquered it for us! He has brought us perfection! Let the praises out! Let people know the peace you have because of your King. Don’t hold it back. Sing his praises! If singing isn’t your thing, then simply tell others about what your King has done for you. Tell them why his is your King, that he has done miracles for you, that through the miracle of baptism he has made you perfect, that in the miracle of the Lord’s Supper he has personally forgiven your sins. Tell them that you come to church because you can’t hold back your joy over these miracles that you have seen. Shout “Hosanna!” “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Amen.