



## THREE PROCESSIONALS

Pastor Derek Sanford Palm Sunday  
9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church April 1, 2007

### Introduction

In the spring of 1992 I was a junior in college at Taylor University working on degrees in Biblical Studies and Philosophy. I was thoroughly enjoying my first year of marriage. I was thinking about a summer job that would be more in line with my future career than the construction work that I'd been doing the four summers prior to that one, when a surprising opportunity came my way. I was offered a job as an interim youth director at Grace Church in Erie – my home church. The money was decent, so I took it. Things went well during those three summer months, the ministry was going well, students were growing and some great ministry was happening. At the end of my summer I was getting ready to go back to school for my senior year. Some leaders at Grace had suggested that I stay in the position and finish my senior year in Erie, but I decided to go back.

A year later as a graduating senior I discovered that the position was still open and available. Kim had wanted to come back to Erie to learn the family business, so things were lining up perfectly. We prayed about a move back to Erie, and we were both energized and excited about the possibilities. I can honestly say that I had never been so sure of the will of God in all my life. He was putting all the pieces together perfectly. My interviews were going well at Grace, and it was down to the final two candidates. I was a shoe-in. They gave the job to the other guy. And I was completely devastated, confused, and disappointed.

It brings me to the question of the morning. What do we do when we're disappointed by Jesus? How do we react when Jesus isn't the leader we expected him to be, or when he leads us places that we didn't intend to go? What do you do when the king shows up and his offer is different than what you wanted?

This is Palm Sunday weekend. Palm Sunday in Erie always cracks me up because Palm branches aren't really a reality for us. But this begins the most holy week in the life of the church. And I love the fact that the church has these high and holy times in its calendar because it becomes so easy for us to move out of the rhythm of worship, and to allow all that is taking place in our lives, and in our workplace and in our families to really begin shaping our souls. As opposed to letting the story of Christ always be the dominant thing that shapes our souls. I ask you and I ask myself, are you going to enter the story of Jesus this Holy Week? Sometimes we just leave here and mindlessly do life. My prayer is that this week you would truly enter into the story of Christ.

Today we celebrate the day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and people threw palm branches down at his feet. I want to look at a few different scenes that unfolded in Jesus' final week, and I want to consider the perspectives of some of the people in the crowd in Jerusalem that day, because to every different group in Jerusalem, Jesus wasn't really the king they were looking for. And sometimes that's true of us, and so in the unfolding of this story, I pray that this story of the King of Kings would critique us, convict us, convince us, comfort us whatever it needs to do.

The Last Day is a book that came out last year chronicling the final week of Jesus' life. I've read some excerpts and articles from this book, and though I don't agree with many of the theological conclusions of the authors, some of the historical contextual research is very well done. Some of their writing fired my imagination about the different storylines that were going on both on the surface and below the surface on that Palm Sunday, and I owe this book some of the inspiration for today's sermon.

The first text I want us to look at comes from **Mark 11:1-11**.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!" Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

## **Processional #1 – Jesus**

First, I want to point out that riding the donkey was an intentional and significant act for Jesus. It was a very messianic act. This is the only account that we have of Jesus riding anything, so we know that it was a deliberate decision on Jesus' part. Most people think that his decision to ride a donkey was because of his humility and not wanting to have the appearance of royalty. But it was just the opposite. He accepted the title of King, and he accepted the people's praise. Kings did ride donkeys. This particular image of Jesus on the donkey provides a clear link between Jesus and King David and also provides the fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 that says, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey..." In this simple act, Jesus is declaring himself as messiah.

But what a lot of people don't realize is that this prediction of Zechariah actually recalls an earlier event from 200 years prior to the prophet Zechariah. You see Zechariah is actually predicting that what happened at King Solomon's coronation as king back in 790 BC would one day happen again when the Messiah comes to rule as king. The book of 1 Kings describes Solomon's coronation this way: "Zadok the priest, [and] Nathan the prophet...put Solomon on King David's mule and escorted him to Gihon. Zadok the priest took the horn of oil... and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, 'Long live King Solomon.'" And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly" (1 Kings 1:38-40).

Can you see the similarities between Solomon's coronation in 790 BC, Zechariah's prophecy two hundred years later in 520 BC, and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in about 33 AD? Jesus is enacting the moment that all of Jewish history was pointing toward. And the people were shouting "hosanna" which means "save now." The people wanted Jesus to save them immediately. It was also often used as a word of praise, much like we might use the words "Hallelujah" or "Amen."

I also want us to notice the ending of this story. It kind of fizzles out at the end. Jesus' processional ended at the temple. He calmly got off the donkey walked in to the temple and looked around and then left the city for the night. He would be back tomorrow to wreck the place.

This is the first procession into Jerusalem. But I want you to imagine that you're looking at a Google Maps satellite image of Jerusalem that day, looking down on the city from above. Jesus' procession was coming in to the city from the East. He was coming from Bethpage; he had just finished raising Lazarus from the dead. And there had been a small crowd gathering steam from Jericho and the towns in between who were joining him on his journey to Jerusalem. It was kind of a ragtag group of followers coming in to the city from the east. But somewhere around this same time, there was a very different processional coming in to the city from the west.

## **Processional #2 – Pilate the Governor**

This was the imperial procession of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria. This procession was nothing new. Each year the Roman governor of the Judea and Samaria came to Jerusalem during the time of the Jewish Passover, not out of reverence for the sacred festivals of the Jewish people, but in order to maintain order by the use of force if necessary. The feast of the Passover was the time when the city was packed with

Jewish people. But it wasn't just the numbers that caused the Romans worry; it was the nature of Passover itself as a feast commemorating Jewish liberation from their overlords in Egypt. It had the potential to get out of control (although I know it's probably hard for you to imagine anything getting out of control in that region of the world.)

And so the procession of Pontius Pilate into Jerusalem was all about keeping Roman order in a situation that could easily get out of control, and the main purpose of the procession was to demonstrate the Roman strength and might. This is how Borg and Crossan, the authors of *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* describe it: "Cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. The (sound of marching) feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, the swirling of dust." Pilate was probably riding in a chariot, the Praetorian Guard walking alongside as body guards. This was a site to behold.

And as these two processions were coming in to the same city from opposite directions, the stage was being set for these two forces, these two kingdoms, to collide on Friday morning. These two stories are soon going to become part of the same story. Here comes the governor in a tank and Jesus in a pinto and the stage is being set for the face-off. Let's jump ahead and read about the face-off in Mark 15.

### **Mark 15:1-15**

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, "Aren't you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of." But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

"Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

When you put these two scenes side by side there are some different perspectives or powers that present themselves. And I would like to explore them because I believe they have some relevancy to us today and they also give us some insight into the kind of King that Jesus was. I mean here is this penniless prophet who doesn't even have enough cash on him to get his own donkey. And we're left thinking, "This is the king?" Only a band of fools is following him, and in the end most of them don't even hang in there with him. Of these two processions, he really looks like he's on the short end of the stick. He looks like the loser, and yet in all his interactions in that final week, Jesus brings this subversive resistance to bear and we get a glimpse into another kingdom. He has the power to take the injustice that's being leveled against him and turn it in to God's holy justice for mankind. It's a different kind of power that can make incredible good out of unspeakable evil. It's like he's crying out to us through his silence, that his power will rule.

I let my imagination wander a little this week as I wondered what the next meeting between Jesus and Pilate was like. They met again you know, on the other side of this life, and there was no question that time whose rule was supreme.

But as you hold these two scenes up together side by side several perspectives emerge. All three groups and perspectives contributed to Jesus' death sentence. These three perspectives still remain today and Jesus critiques all three of him by his actions and sometimes by his silence.

**1. Political Perspective** – Jesus went face to face, toe to toe with the political leaders of the day. It's important to remember that by the time Jesus gets to this place where he stands before Pilate he had already been beaten. He had no shoes, his garments were torn, and he was bloodied, and appeared completely powerless. He stood before Pilate who had the look of power ever since he entered the city in his imperial parade. But it was a false power because we find out in the story that Pilate was really controlled by all these other forces; the Jewish leaders, the crowds, etc. Jesus was the only one person in that room who had real power. And after remaining completely silent in many of his other confrontations on that day, Jesus said the one sentence to Pilate that did him in; the one sentence that would get him killed. He claimed to be king. You see Caesar was the king and was considered God, and Caesar's son – the son of God. To claim anything else meant certain death.

Jesus had the opportunity to spin the story – he could have gotten out of this. Pilate seemed more than willing to extend some leeway. Jesus could have phrased it a different way or parsed his words a little better. But he didn't. He did something so powerful – but it looked so weak. He let these people run their power game and didn't stoop down to participate in it. His kingdom is obviously not of this world because our world doesn't operate like this. He just said it flat out, "I am the King of the Jews – I'm their messiah – the one this world has been waiting for." It's the statement that would get him crucified.

It's easy to mistake political power for real power. We see this today in our modern political system. Everyone wants Jesus on their side. Everyone is asking, how do we get the religious vote? We reduce a whole kingdom, a whole way of life, a whole subversive resistance, to two issues and put Jesus on the campaign trail. And Jesus testifies – I am not that king – I'm not your toy - I don't play that game. It doesn't mean that we're not politically involved; it just means that our king does not operate the way our political system operates.

**2. Religious Perspective** – It was the religious community that got Jesus into this mess in the first place. "Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate." These were the religious leaders who finally got their wish. In fact in John's gospel we gain some insight into the scene. Pilate wanted to hand Jesus back over to the religious leaders and have them put him on trial under their own laws. Do you know why they refused? "But we have no right to execute anyone." (18:31). Jesus stands in the face of dead religion and refuses to bow to its power.

Modern religion has gone to two extremes. On one hand some churches have stripped Jesus of all his power by falling into dead ritualism, and on the other hand, some have decided that Jesus isn't entertaining enough. Some have become peddlers of preference when it comes to Jesus; some people have even made a living out of selling Jesus junk. And many people want to add Jesus on to their lives – we want to assume that he's the missing link to your wealth, he's the missing link to your happiness, he's the missing link to that unattractive tendency you have and you just need a little self-help.

Picture Jesus for a moment with no shoes on and with a bloody lip and imagine him critiquing the current state of Christianity in America. We reduce him to trinkets, we reduce him to self help, and we reduce him to our little club that huddles together while injustice is happening all around us in the world. We like to sit in the safe places and cry out "why is there so much injustice?" We ask God, "Why do you allow injustice?" And sometimes I wonder if God isn't looking back at us and asking us the same question.

And Jesus critiques us by saying "Whatever weird religious gimmicks you come up with - I'm not that king..." Some people hide behind the idea that they don't understand the bible, and they try to make it all complex and then hide behind that. But I ask you, what part of give your stuff away to others don't you understand? What part of love your enemy don't you understand? It's not complicated – it's just not easy – and we like easy. GK Chesterton said, "It's not that Christianity has been tested and proven wrong, it's been tested and proven hard, so it remains untested."

**3. Popular opinion** – The crowd takes up the cause to crucify Jesus. Many of the same people who were waving palm branches earlier in the week were now ready to get rid of Jesus. What did Jesus think when he looked out at his people and at the now enraged or indifferent faces of his so-called admirers. Jesus brought the

kingdom to his people and they said, “Not interested – you’re not the kind of king we were hoping for.” And his death sentence is pronounced at the request of his people.

We want to make Jesus more palatable. We want to make the cross less cross-like. In the sway of the culture – we’re at risk of losing this suffering king. We reduce Jesus to someone who winks and looks the other way. When we walk away from him we think, “oh he won’t mind.” We don’t want to risk losing our personal popularity by resisting the culture, repenting of sins we committed, and sins for the things we’ve left undone in the name of saving face for ourselves, or following Jesus’ way of the cross. We want to keep one foot in Christianity, but we keep a safe enough distance that we don’t get ruined by Jesus. And the other foot in the world that keeps us popular with our friends, accepting, and un-confrontational. Jesus says, “I’m not that king.”

When we think of these powerful forces and even the power that they still have over us today – it’s not a far leap to think that confronted by the power of these forces, that you or I easily could have been swayed from shouting praises on Sunday to shouting crucify him on Friday. Crowds change their minds a lot. It’s one of the grave dangers in getting caught up in crowd thinking; so many opinions and ideas at work. So I just want to pause and ask you, what is your opinion of Jesus now? I’m sure that we believe that we wouldn’t yell crucify him. But we yell it differently. Like when we take a step back from him, follow him at a distance because following too closely would cost us too much. We yell at him different ways. What angle are you entering his story from right now, this Easter season?

We have an opportunity to enter into holy week and let it ruin us; to throw off the shackles of our political, religious, popular opinion baggage and just come face to face with Jesus again. Let us become the band of fools. Let us be the people who say - we’re going to bring justice out of injustice. The reality of following this king should wreck us a whole lot more than it does.

So when has it happened for you, when Jesus wasn’t the king you thought he would be. Maybe it was during long seasons of unanswered prayer. Maybe you’re battling a hardship or difficulty and try as you might – you just don’t see the purpose in it. Maybe you’ve been moving around from city to city your whole life and just get word that you’re moving again. Or tragedy has come to your household and you say – this isn’t what I signed up for. Maybe you became a Christian thinking that life would get better, that there would be health and wealth in your future and it just hasn’t happened. How do you respond when you thought you had Jesus all boxed up into a neat little package and then suddenly hear him say, “I’m not that King?”

When Jesus is not the King we expected:

**1. Make a decision about following Christ based on who he is and not what he can do for you.**

American Christianity has become so consumerized. Many people got into this faith system for what it could do for them. Jesus doesn’t roll that way. It’s about him and his will – he deserves to be followed whether we’re getting warm fuzzies out of the deal or not.

**2. Dwell in the mystery of his beautiful darkness.** I once heard Mike Yaconelli talk about God as this being that only allows us to know a fraction of who He is. And there are times and seasons in our lives when we get a glimpse of a part of God that we don’t understand. And our tendency is to try to scramble out of there and get back to what we know, when the best thing to do may be to just dwell there in the mysterious darkness of God for a while. Revel in His un-knowability. The disciples went into a season of confusion – but they hung in there – they remained faithful in spite of their confusion. And I wonder if we have become too dependent upon answers. I used to think that the most mature Christians were the ones with the most answers. Now some of the most mature Christians that I know are the ones with the deepest and most profound questions. I have found that the deeper I go with God, the more I realize I don’t know him.

**3. Maintain a healthy skepticism of politics, religion, and popular opinion.** If Jesus as our leader introduced a Kingdom that couldn’t be harnessed or contained by any of these institutions. If our leader made these institutions uncomfortable, we should respect these institutions but maintain a healthy skepticism about the extent of their authority.

## **Processional #3 – the Lambs**

There was another procession into Jerusalem that day. It was the procession of the lambs. You see one of the requirements of the Passover was that every family in the region, every pilgrim that was entering the city from around the world, would bring a lamb to be sacrificed on behalf their family for the sins of the whole year. So while these two very different processions were converging on the city from the east and from the west, thousands of individuals were also descending on the city with their lambs that they had selected as their Passover sacrifice.

Why were these families coming in to Jerusalem on that Sunday? Five days before the lambs would be sacrificed was called lamb selection day. In this case, the Passover day of sacrifice was Friday just before the Sabbath, and so lamb selection day happened to be Sunday – Palm Sunday. Therefore, Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, came riding in to Jerusalem very appropriately on lamb selection day.

Later in the week, on Friday, all the lambs that were brought in to the city on Sunday would be sacrificed. For the previous 1,200 years it had happened the same way, the priest would blow the shophar (ram's horn) at 3:00 p.m. on Friday - the moment the lambs were sacrificed, and all the people would pause to contemplate the sacrifice for sins on behalf of the people of Israel. Little did they know that this year would be different than all the rest in one very important way. There was an ultimate sacrifice that was made complete at 3:00 on that Friday afternoon. When he died, the veil in the temple was torn in two signifying that the dividing wall between God and man had been destroyed – that the likes of you and I could have full access to the God of the universe, the creator of our souls. There would no longer need to be a parade of lambs at Passover because the ultimate sacrifice had already been made for all mankind.

Our savior, bloody and beaten, the sacrificial lamb, is not always the king we expect him to be. He is full of surprises and angles that don't always make sense to us. But in the end – Jesus knows what he's doing. His Kingdom is different than the ones we are familiar with. His agenda is different than ours. His perspective is more comprehensive than ours. His ways are higher than ours. He is smarter than us. He's the Lamb of God.

## **Conclusion**

There is a contemporary parable told about two men who were in an art museum and they came upon a painting of a chess game. In the painting, one character looked like a man; the other character looked a lot like the Devil. The Devil was winning this particular match in that the man was down to his last piece - the King. The title of the painting is Checkmate.

One of the two men looking at this painting was an international chess champion, and something about the painting intrigued him. He began to study it. He became so engrossed that the other man grew impatient and asked him what he was doing.

The chess champion said, "There's something about this painting that bothers me, and I want to study it for a little while. You go ahead and wander around." He studied it. His head started nodding, and his hands started moving. When his friend came back, he said, "We have to locate the man who painted this picture and tell him that either he has to change the picture, or he has to change the title. I have determined that there is something wrong with this painting, and I am an international chess champion." His friend asked, "What's wrong with the painting?" The man said, "Well, it's titled Checkmate, but the title is wrong. The painter's either got to change the painting or change the title, because the King still has one more move."

The amazing thing about the Holy week accounts in the scripture is that Jesus said, "I'm going to allow my body to be broken and blood poured out and I will bring about freedom, and peace, and victory – while everyone else in this story thinks they're winning." And he knew something that no one else in the story knew - the King still had one more move.