



Palm Sunday
March 29, 2026
Matthew 21:1-11

Join Jesus in the Valleys

Whistle. He rides into town on a blazing white stallion, kicking up dust on the trail behind him. He's huntin' down trouble. As he passes the crowds lined up on Main Street, you can sense the stir growing among the people. They stand in awe of the beautiful animal, but even more in awe of the man riding it. The villains are on the loose. The visiting hero quickly sizes up the situation and forms a plan to capture the ringleader, known simply as Diablo. After a short scuffle, the hero ties Diablo up and hands him over to the local sheriff to throw into jail. As the crowds circle around, the hero mounts his horse, pulls back on the reins, and rides off into the sunset. The people can only ask, "Who is this?"

Ok... that's not quite how it happened. But today, on this Palm Sunday, even more than enjoying an old Western movie in our living rooms or envisioning this scene played out in Virginia City, we get to marvel at Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a mission. But he's not proudly pulling back the reins on a warhorse. He's humbling sitting on a young donkey. He's not barreling into town to chase down outlaws. Rather, he's about to be convicted as one. Yet, something stays the same in both scenes: "Who is this?" With emotions running high, that was the city-wide question. And isn't that when we often ask something similar. Oh, I venture to say many of us can rattle off Jesus facts: born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried. But when we're experiencing what's equivalent to an emotional earthquake, when we're not sure what's going on in our lives or in the world around us, it's then that our stirring hearts ask the same question, just, "Who is this?" Who really is this Jesus in my life? And I pray today, a closer look at the words of Matthew 21, helps us to marvel at the answer.

The stirred-up city didn't have to wait long for an answer. Before they could even punctuate their statement with a question mark, the crowds replied, *"This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."* At first blush, that sounds like a great answer. It is a great answer. Jesus was a prophet. He was one who faithfully proclaimed God's Word as he traveled around preaching and teaching, village to village, most of the time in Galilee. And when our troubled hearts ask, "Who is this?" it's valuable for us to remember that. Jesus isn't a personal finance consultant who gives you all the stock tips. He's not a horoscope or a fortune cookie. He's not just a buddy to grab a beer with. Jesus is someone who preached and now preaches the truth through his unchanging Word. That makes him trustworthy and reliable.

I'm no Jesus, but this scene does remind me of something I experienced. For the last seven years I umpired high school baseball. Every year we have 4-5 training meetings before the season. My first two years in the association, the 100 other umpires in that room didn't really know my name. But they all knew what I did. "Hey preacher! Hey preacher!" If I heard it once, I heard it 1000 times. Just because someone knows what you do, doesn't always mean they know who you are.

In context, I wonder if that's what is going on with the crowd here a bit. Did they only know what Jesus did and not know who he was? Yes, Jesus was the prophet from Nazareth. Yeah, but it wasn't the fact that he was from Nazareth that set him apart. But he wasn't just one of many prophets. He's not just another Moses, Nathan, or Obadiah. And there are people and world religions who still say that about Jesus today. He's a prophet. Yes, but... He wasn't just someone who preached God's Word. He was someone who fulfilled God's Word. And that's what Matthew wants us to know today. As Jesus hops on that borrowed colt, look what Matthew writes, *"This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet."*

Let me try to illustrate what this teaches us about Jesus' identity. There are more than 300 prophecies about the coming Messiah in the Old Testament. Prophecies that span centuries. Matthew quotes Zechariah, a prophet who lived 500 years before Jesus. Some mathematician figured out that the chances of having these prophecies funnel down to be fulfilled in one person at one point in history, is like filling the Silver State with silver dollars almost five feet deep and me telling you, "Find the one with the X on it." I know we're a gambling state, but I don't know if there's anyone who would gamble with those odds. But it shows us just how unique Jesus was. It shows us that he is, in fact, what the prophet Zechariah calls him: king. Nobody else could do this. That's comforting, isn't it, when we ask, "Who is this?" Who is this Jesus in my life? When your heart is stirred by a situation out of your control – got one in mind? -- see your *King* comes to you. Not just the prophet from Nazareth, but your *King* comes to you. When your hopes are sinking over a situation that seems to be getting increasingly worse – got one in mind? -- see your *King* comes to you. Whether you're waving palms or need a heart calmed, Jesus was, is, and always will be king.

And it's not just that he comes as king that is so reassuring, it's how he comes. Granted, there's a great comfort knowing that he's a powerful king who can make stones cry out, as Luke reports in his Palm Sunday account. But Matthew and Zechariah both want us to *"see your King comes gentle."* In other words, he's not just a king who's perched on his throne on a mountaintop giving executive orders to all his peons. Rather, he's a king who comes down to our level. He comes to the streets of our cities, the classrooms of our schools, the kitchens of our homes, the bedsides of our hospitals, and the gravesides of cemeteries. He comes to the valleys of our lives and assures, "Your King is here." That's who this Jesus is. He's a prophet. And he's a king. He's *the* prophet. And he's *the* King.

Now some of you may know where I'm going with this. If you've gone through our Starting Point class or catechism class, we talk about three roles or three offices of Jesus. Prophet – he proclaimed the Word when he walked on this earth and he continues to speak through his Word. King – he rules all things and he reigns in our hearts. Office #3? Priest. Functions of a priest in the Old Testament – intercede for the people and make sacrifices in the temple for the sins of the people. Where do we see that happening here? It's subtle, but it's there in the Palm Sunday word of the day. Kids, this is the answer to your question #2 today. "Hosanna." Yes, it has become a somewhat generic word of praise. But at its root, it's a prayer. It's a plea. "Lord, save us!"

And on Palm Sunday, we see Jesus, priest Jesus, on his way to answer that prayer. Priest Jesus walked this path to kick off Holy Week – a week like none other in history -- knowing exactly where it would lead. Yes, it would lead to a temple on Monday, but he wouldn't sacrifice as a priest there. Rather, on Monday he was a janitor who cleaned house because they had made God's house such a circus. But you keep going with priest Jesus all week. You go to an Upper Room on Thursday, and what do you hear? Priest Jesus interceding, praying for his disciples and praying for you. You climb a hill on Friday, and what do you see? Priest Jesus offering his blood on the altar of the cross, paying for the sins of the whole world. You go to a locked room on Sunday, and what do you hear? Priest Jesus offering peace to his followers, because the price he offered satisfied God's justice. Palm Sunday means nothing if it's not followed by a Good Friday and an Easter Sunday. If there's no Good Friday, Palm Sunday is just a parade. If there is no stone rolled away next Sunday, who cares if stones cry out on this Sunday. But there's no if. Holy Week happened. And that's the last thing Matthew wants us to marvel at today as we consider the question, just "Who is this?"

It's a detail that often goes unnoticed, but do you remember the city that Matthew mentions at the beginning of his Palm Sunday account? Bethphage. It seems a worthless detail, but that's likely because we're not familiar with the geography surrounding Jerusalem. For me, that often happens when I read about places in Scripture. It just goes over my head. But if I say places like Cold Springs, Stead, Sun Valley, Spanish Springs, Damonte Ranch... what do you just do? You just drew a mental map. So what's the significance of Bethphage? A city whose name means, "House of Unripe Figs." How would you like that for your city slogan on your downtown arch? Fittingly, it's the place where Jesus was hungry on Monday of Holy Week and he went to this leafy fig tree, only to be disappointed that there was no fruit. The city lived up to its name.

But let's talk geography. Bethphage is on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the whole city of Jerusalem. From there, Jesus could see the temple he would have to clear out. He could see Gethsamene, where he sweat drops of blood as he faced the cup of God's wrath. He could see the home of the high priest Caiaphas, where he would be mocked. He could see the palace where Pilate would try him and the Praetorium where he would be flogged. He could see Golgotha, where he would be forsaken by his Father and breathe his last. And yet what did Jesus do? He went into the valley to carry out his mission. With all the opportunities to worship this Holy Week, I invite and encourage you to join Jesus as he goes into the valley so that we can marvel at just who he is as we see him carry out his mission for us.

But don't stop there. As Jesus looked and looks at people in these Valleys, he still sees thousands of people who ask, "Who is this?" Eight Palm Sundays ago, he graciously marched into these Valleys and began to answer that question through our congregation, as our first worship was held at the old O'Brien middle school. But the mission isn't done yet. There are still people in these Valleys who ask, "Who is this?" And Jesus wants them to know what you know: that he's your prophet, your priest, your king, your Savior. So let's join Jesus in the Valleys, celebrating what he already has done. And on this anniversary weekend, let's recommit ourselves not just to keep the mission or our mission going, but to keep his mission going until no one has to ask, "Who is this?" because all will know who he is. God bless us to that end. Amen.

