

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week in the Church calendar, which means that next week is Easter Sunday, Resurrection Sunday. This week is what the gospel is all about and this week is all about the gospel. What a blessing it is to be here with you this morning and to share God's Word on such a special day and in such a special season. As we get started today, I'd like to invite you to open up your Bibles to Matthew 21.

Have you ever lived under the immense pressure of impossibly high expectations? No matter how hard you worked, how much you tried, how many awards and accolades you received, which schools you managed to attend, or which jobs you managed to land, it just was never going to be enough. You were never going to be enough. You were never going to find peace.

Or maybe your source of lofty expectations for you were different. Maybe you were the oldest sibling who just couldn't catch a break; something more was always expected or needed. Maybe you were the family's path out of poverty. Maybe you were supposed to be the star athlete destined for greatness. How many of you have ever felt the weight, the burden, the yoke of other's expectations for you?

There have been a number of notable people that you may remember who were destined to be the next great one. Tiger Woods was fresh out of Stanford when Sports Illustrated put him on the cover, calling him "The New Master." LeBron James was only a junior in high school when Sports Illustrated put him on the cover "The Chosen One" and he was only a freshman in high school when he first received the nickname "King" James. Or how many remember when Bryce Harper first made his appearance on the cover of Sports Illustrated at 15 years old with the words "Chosen One" placed boldly next to him?

These are extraordinary examples, extreme examples, I know, but they are also very real and relatable metaphors for so many. You didn't have to be the next "chosen one" in sports to feel that kind of pressure; people everywhere feel that kind of pressure in their families, in business, in politics, and just in life.

In fact, even the most well-intentioned and well-meaning people manage to place that kind of pressure on those around them. As a dad, I know the temptation all too well

to run my kids ragged so that they can achieve, succeed, and win at life.

How many languages do they know? How many instruments do they play? What kind of traveling sports teams do they play on? How many hours of community service have they done? How prepared are they for their SATs? What is their GPA? What is their weighted GPA? The list goes on and on and on. It is hard to find contentment; it is hard to find peace when these are the stories we tell, and these are the stories told to us.

There may not be many other regions in the world where this is more true than the one we live in today because just down the road from us are places like Stanford, Market Street, and Sand Hill Road, where success is the only option, where winning is the only option, where being the best of the best of the best is the only option.

As a community, we often live in a perpetual search for the next life-changing idea, the next 20-billion-dollar startup, the next unicorn. What's funny is we actually use this language. We know unicorns are mythical creatures that don't exist, and yet we go out searching to find them in the proverbial sense. We have to find that next unicorn entrepreneur because we have to be first to market because we have to be the biggest, and because we have to win. Have you ever asked yourself where that comes from? Why do we do that? What's the point of it all?

I think for a lot of us, the goal is rather simple: We want peace. And we think, without even realizing it sometimes, that peace will come through affluence, education, success, prestige, and notoriety.

If I can just climb to the top, whatever the top is, I can finally have peace. I will have enough food, clothing, travel, fun, luxury, and influence that I will want for nothing. Then, and only then, can I have peace.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, "Josh, sure, but what does this have to do with Palm Sunday? What does this have to do with Jesus?" Well, I think it has quite a lot to do with Jesus, particularly when you think back and remember his origin story, the Christmas story.

We don't have time to go back and re-tell that story this morning, but suffice it to say, there has never been a more "Chosen One," full-of-lofty-expectations kind of entrance

into the world in all of the time than his story. From the moment he was even conceived, not just born, but conceived, the weight of the world was, quite literally, placed on his shoulders.

The prophets foretold of him centuries and millennia before him. His mother couldn't have conceived that she'd conceive him. The powers resisted and sought to kill him. The Shepherds came to honor him. The Magi traveled thousands of miles to bring gifts to him. And all of this happened before he was even a toddler. Sports Illustrated covers had nothing on him!

For the first 30 or so years of his life, he lived quietly, unassumingly, not quite in obscurity, but not yet fully known, not yet fully realized. But one day, in a moment, that all began to change. He walked into the Jordan River, was baptized by John the Baptist, heard the voice of the Father in heaven, spent 40 days fasting and being tested in the wilderness, and then showed up in Galilee and began to preach.

And what was he preaching? "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17b). According to the prophet, Isaiah, "the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16).

For three years, that "light" traveled all around the region preaching, teaching, healing, and challenging the elites, authorities, and powers of his day. For three years, the crowds followed him, sometimes amazed at what he said and did, sometimes angry, but they followed with an inquisitiveness, with an unquenchable curiosity:

Could this indeed be "The Chosen One?" Could this be the long-awaited Christ, the long-awaited Messiah? Is this the One who will save us and bring peace?

As Christians, when we talk about words like "save" and "salvation," we are often speaking in terms of things like sin. In other words, we have this understanding that we are broken people who need to be saved and redeemed of our brokenness. But for the people of Jesus' day, salvation often meant and looked like something altogether different in their minds. It was often very political language; it was an intense awareness of and acknowledgment of their oppression that for hundreds of years, ever since they had been exiled, ever since they had been removed from the Promised Land, the people of Israel had lived under foreign powers and foreign kings.

In 721 BC, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrian Empire. In 586 BC, the Southern Kingdom of Judah had fallen to the Babylonian Empire. In 539 BC, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians and the Medes. In

333 BC, the Persians and the Medes fell to Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire. In 146 BC, the Greek Empire fell to the Roman Empire.

For any of you who have ever had a mortgage or a loan that just keeps getting sold to bank after bank after bank, it was kind of like that, but infinitely worse. The people of Israel had been living for nearly 800 years in a never-ending onslaught of conquering powers and dominion; they had no peace.

Even as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell a story of the return of the people of Israel to the Promised Land, it's important to remember two things: It was only a remnant. The Land still did not belong to them. It belonged to Rome, and Caesar was king.

So imagine their surprise when Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Suddenly, that language begins to take on a whole new meaning. You can almost imagine and visualize the looks on their faces as their ears begin to perk up. "What did he just say?" Because they know what the prophets foretold, they know Isaiah's words written 800 years earlier.

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and
peace there will be no end. He will reign on
David's throne and over his kingdom, estab-
lishing and upholding it with justice and righ-
teousness from that time on and forever. The
zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.
Isaiah 9:6–7**

These are words that they know. And here comes Jesus proclaiming that a new kind of Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, is near, is at hand. Can you see it? Can you see what they see? Can you hear what they hear? Can you infer what they infer?

Sometimes, I talk to my cat, and I say words that I know he likes to hear; they are words like "food" or "treat," and he may not be gracious enough to turn around and grant me eye contact because he is doing important things like slumbering, but I will watch those ears twist and bend and contort in all directions because he and I both know I used some of those magical words.

That is what Jesus began to do and continues to do all throughout his ministry. He uses language that he knows will begin to pique their interest, that will begin to rouse them from their slumber, and that will begin to wake them up.

So as Jesus and his disciples set off on a journey or pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, something hundreds of thousands of the scattered people of Israel would do each and every year to commemorate their freedom from slavery in the Exodus out of Egypt in the days of Moses, Jesus does something strange. He stops just shy of the city, about four miles outside of Jerusalem, and goes to the Mount of Olives, to a place called Bethphage or “the house of unripe figs,” and there he gives some instructions to two of his disciples:

“Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.” Matthew 21:2–3

Now, I don’t know how you have traditionally understood this story or this text, so I can only speak for me, but throughout most of my life, when I read this account, and Jesus is telling his disciples what they will find and what people will say, and how this was all going to go, it very much came across as this prescient sort of moment where Jesus was looking into the future with some divine foreknowledge that only he could know.

While that’s possible, it’s also possible that Jesus has sort of pre-arranged this moment, and that’s entirely okay because, again, Jesus is not inventing this story as he goes; his story is part of something that predated his arrival in Bethlehem not just by hundreds of years, but by thousands. What is getting ready to happen is thousands of years in the making.

The first oddity that you may notice about this text, especially if you are familiar with this story, is that Jesus doesn’t just want them to bring back one donkey, two donkeys. A Donkey and her colt. Why? That may be even more curious when you consider that the other Palm Sunday texts in the gospels only mention one donkey. But Matthew mentions two. It turns out that’s a really important detail for Matthew’s audience because you have to consider who the Gospel of Matthew is written to.

Matthew is unique among all four gospels in that its audience is geared primarily at Jewish believers, which means that there are some very special twists and details thrown in that Matthew includes in his gospel because he knows they will be deeply meaningful to Jewish skeptics, the kind of people who know the Torah, and the Old Testament prophets, but are maybe timid or trepidatious to admit Jesus might be the long-awaited Messiah.

Anybody who uses the internet probably knows what a hyperlink is. It’s this little piece of text that links to some

other place, some other piece of information that’s relevant. When Matthew includes this detail, he anticipates a certain level of Torah understanding, such that the reader will see the hyperlink and immediately begin to recognize the imagery.

But just to make sure that the reader gets it, he tells us what Jesus was doing explicitly.

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, AND on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” Matthew 21:4–5

It turns out that about 500 years earlier, the Prophet Zechariah began to receive and share some words from God about a future when all of the oppressors of God’s people when all the powers over them, would finally face their day of reckoning, moment of divine justice for their enemies. This is what Zechariah said:

A prophecy: The word of the Lord is against the land of Hadrak and will come to rest on Damascus—for the eyes of all people and all the tribes of Israel are on the Lord—and on Hamath too, which borders on it, and on Tyre and Sidon, though they are very skillful. Tyre has built herself a stronghold; she has heaped up silver like dust, and gold like the dirt of the streets. But the Lord will take away her possessions and destroy her power on the sea, and she will be consumed by fire. Ashkelon will see it and fear; Gaza will writhe in agony, and Ekron too, for her hope will wither. Gaza will lose her king and Ashkelon will be deserted. A mongrel people will occupy Ashdod, and I will put an end to the pride of the Philistines. I will take the blood from their mouths, the forbidden food from between their teeth. Those who are left will belong to our God and become a clan in Judah, and Ekron will be like the Jebusites. But I will encamp at my temple to guard it against marauding forces. Never again will an oppressor overrun my people, for now I am keeping watch. Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. Zechariah 9:1–10

Now, if I were to guess, there are some in this room reading this text thinking that it doesn’t say two donkeys; it just says, “a donkey” and then, more specifically, “a colt” or a

young donkey. You're not entirely wrong; that is certainly a way to read this, but we also haven't gone back far enough yet.

How many of you are familiar with the Joseph story that begins in Genesis 37? Joseph's story is an incredible story, one of my absolute favorites, and likely one of yours as well. It checks all the boxes for any great story. It has a main character who starts off a little bratty but generally becomes hard-working and likable. The main character goes through unimaginable trials and tribulations full of ups and downs. In the end, we see how God uses all those trials to save Joseph's family from starvation, and there's this great moment of reunion, reconciliation, and forgiveness, with the ultimate happy ending.

As the book of Genesis ends, we close that story feeling great. It's the perfect ending. Of course, as a church, we all spent most of the last year in Exodus, the sequel, so we already know that it doesn't last long. But the Joseph story is just great. But what if the Joseph story is not the Joseph story?

You see, there's this strange little pause in Joseph's story for one chapter in Genesis 38, where the author takes his attention off Joseph and begins to tell the story of Judah and Tamar, which seems like a really weird curveball. This is a scandalous story where Judah, now a widower, ultimately ends up sleeping with his daughter-in-law, a woman twice widowed by Judah's sons, who is disguising herself and pretending to be a prostitute because Judah broke a promise to her. She then gets pregnant by Judah.

I've read the commentaries; you can too. Scholars are dumbfounded about why this story is here. It doesn't make any sense to them whatsoever, but I happen to think it's very important. Why?

Well, it just so happens that Tamar has a baby named Perez. And as we learn that information, the author of Genesis now shifts his attention back to Joseph for the next 12 chapters. It would appear that Genesis 38 is just some neat, trivial, need-to-know information. But is that all it is? Just a weird informative story? I think there are two incredibly important facets of this story that intersect the Palm Sunday story, the entry into Jerusalem by Jesus.

First, at the end of Genesis in chapter 48, there is this poignant moment where Jacob, the man literally named Israel, the father of Joseph and his 11 brothers, sits with Joseph and Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. There, Jacob will say and do something important. He will ask to bless Joseph's sons in the same way that he was blessed by his father, Isaac, and then he will say:

"Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine. Genesis 48:5

Why is this important? It's important because as the pages of the Old Testament carry on, and as they follow the story of the 12 tribes of Israel (or the 12 sons of Jacob), you will notice the name of Joseph begins to fade until it is virtually no more and by the time we reach the story of Joshua and the moment when the 12 tribes would come into the Promised Land of Canaan, the text is no longer speaking about Joseph at all. The tribes are all about Jacob's other sons and Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph disappears from the conversation.

Additionally, in Genesis 49, Jacob is now sitting with his whole family, all sons and grandsons and one-by-one, he begins to go around the room addressing each one and what's interesting is almost without exception, Jacob has some harsh things to say to them, as his parting words, before he dies.

But to the two brothers, in particular, he has some very important and kind and positive things to say. One of them is Joseph, which should not surprise you after all he has done. Jacob says:

"Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers. Genesis 49:22–26

So isn't it strange that Joseph fades so that Ephraim and Manasseh may be exalted and remembered for generations? But maybe there's a point. Maybe Jacob knows or senses something we don't yet know because the other son to receive heaps of praise is none other than Judah, a man previously embroiled in scandal. To Judah, Jacob says this:

"Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down,

like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes will be darker than wine, his teeth whiter than milk. Genesis 49:8–12

Church, what is Jacob saying? Something great will come through Judah. Someone with a scepter, a ruler's staff that will not depart until he to whom it belongs shall come. Now, do you understand why I tell this story? Now, do you understand why two donkeys, a mother, and a colt matter? The ultimate hyperlink isn't to Zechariah; it's to Judah!

So when Matthew begins his gospel, he tells the story of the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah; he begins with these words.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Matthew 1:2–3

Even through great scandal, the Anointed One, the Chosen One, had come to fruition and had entered God's redemptive story. And the people who were living in and journeying toward Jerusalem to remember the Passover story of Exodus, to remember the God who saw them and rescued them in their slavery, are looking at Jesus, and he just told them to go grab a couple of donkeys. Can you see why they might start to get a little excited?

When Jesus calls for those donkeys, it is very much this kind of moment where he is saying without words, but in no uncertain terms, that he is indeed the Anointed One, the Chosen One, the Christ, the Messiah. The text continues:

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" 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." Matthew 21:6–11

In other words, this is The One, the only One. As soon as Jesus summons the donkeys, the crowd goes wild with a

plea. "Hosanna!" It's a word or phrase that means, "Save now!" It's not a question; it's not a request. It's an imperative! What does the person who is stranded at sea say? "Help me!" They don't say, "please;" they insist! "You have to help me!"

Hosanna is that. It's a cry of the oppressed, of the down-trodden, of the hopeless to save them, to rescue them. They are all there to celebrate and commemorate that time when God reached down and rescued them from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt, who rescued them from slavery.

Hosanna is a plea to do it again! Hosanna is a cry for peace in a world without any. Hosanna proclaims a new Kingdom and a new King. It's a thorough rejection of the powers of this world.

What they think that means is that Rome is out, and Judah is in. What they think that means is that Caesar is out, and Jesus is in. What they will come to discover in the coming week is that God's ultimate plan, the one that he has been pursuing for thousands of years, since the fall of man in Genesis 3 until now, is something altogether more beautiful and eternal.

But if there's one thing I want you to see, understand, and receive today, it's this: Throughout all of those passages and hyperlinks that we covered this morning, there is one common theme.

What will this long-propheesied King bring when he arrives? Zechariah 9:10 says, "*He will proclaim peace to the nations.*" Isaiah 9:7 says, "*Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end.*" And as a tip of the hat to this upcoming week.

Isaiah 53:5 says, "*The punishment that brought us peace was on him.*" Church, we have known since the early days of Scripture that nothing belonging to our fallen world has the power to deliver the ultimate. We have known that no person, place, or thing apart from Christ can ever satisfy.

We have known since the days of 1 Samuel 8 that any king and kingdom of this world will take our sons to war. Take our daughters to serve. Take our fields and crops for personal gain. Take our possessions for personal use. They will take and take and take some more until we have nothing left. With them, there can never be peace.

And so what do we do? And how do we find it? Do we find peace through achievement? (No) Do we find peace through substances? The answer is always an overwhelming and astounding "No!" All we have ever found when we have pursued peace through those means is slavery. Whenever we have made those things our Master, they have never brought us peace; they have only ever ruled us.

If you take nothing else from this morning's message and nothing else from the Triumphal Entry of Christ on Palm Sunday, this is what I want you to take: The path to peace is through bended knees! What do I mean?

As far as I can tell, there are three main routes we try to take to find peace in this world and in this life: We pursue peace by letting stuff become king of our lives. We pursue peace by letting people become king of our lives. We pursue peace by letting Jesus Christ become King of our lives.

Every time we sin, we are putting hope in hopeless things. Every time we sin, we are showing love to loveless things. Every time we sin, we find death in lifeless things.

How do I know? Because hope, love, and life are found only in the person of God and His Son who came to give it to you. The Bible says that God is the "Author of Life." The Bible says that God is Love. The Bible says that Jesus is "our hope."

You can admire Jesus from afar, you can be a fan all day long, you can like his teachings and reference his parables, and share memes about him, but if he is not King of your life, you will never find peace. Why? The path to peace is through bended knees!

And this is not a "Jesus and" situation. It's only Jesus because we cannot serve two masters. Either he is, or he isn't. Do you follow me? Liking him isn't the goal. Liking him isn't the way. The path to peace is through bended knees! The people shouted, "Hosanna!" because they knew Jesus was the One.

The question for you to ponder today and this week is: do you? There are zero unicorns, and there's only the One; which will you pursue, and which will you make King of your life?