

### **First and Final Frames.**<sup>1</sup> (slide.1)

As Kaz read, our text comes from the twenty-first chapter of Matthew's Gospel and concerns itself with the triumphal entry of Christ on the very first Palm Sunday. We'll work our way through the text and what these events mean for each of us here. And then, finally in the end, I want to spend some time and look at the importance of the remembrance and celebration that will take place during this Holy Week. But begin by looking to God in prayer. (slide/black.2)

Back in 2015, a filmmaker named Jacob Swinney made a 5½-minute video. It consisted of (Castaway.3) the first frames and the last frames of 55 movies shown side by side. Since that time, he has continued to add new chapters to his collection:

Some (Searchers.4) of the movies are pretty old—made sixty, seventy years ago.  
Others (Superman.5) are more contemporary—made in the last couple of years.  
In some (Silver Linings Playbook.6) cases, the opening and closing frames are very different.  
In other cases (The Godfather.7) they're almost identical.  
In a few cases (Saving Private Ryan.8), they're *completely* identical.  
But even though they may *look* (Wall-E.9) the same, you know that they're *not* the same.  
And the reason why (Gone Girl.10) is because something has happened, a story has transpired.  
And that's (F1.11) what makes a good story a good story.  
It's something that (Dunkirk.12) advances, and develops, and progresses.  
And the (12 Years a Slave.13) the *best* stories are those you have to watch until the very end.

(slide/black.14)

### **The Kings We Seek.**

So there's this great story (slide.15); it comes at the beginning of Holy Week. It's the very first Palm Sunday. It's the story Kaz read for us concerning Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem—the crowds/cheers/praises/adoration extended to Jesus the king who at last receives the recognition He deserves. And to be sure, if it had been up to the disciples, the story would have not only *started* there, it would have (slide.16) ended there as well. After all, prior to this moment, Jesus was largely quiet about His identity.

- In the earlier chapters of the Gospels, Jesus heals a leper, yet He warns him to tell no one.
- He raises Jairus's daughter, but gives strict orders to not let the word get out.
- Demons declare Him to be "the Holy One of God," yet He tells the demons to hush up.
- Peter confesses Jesus to be "the Christ," but our Lord instructs him to keep it to himself.
- Three of the disciples witness the effervescent, crackling glory of God on the Mount of Transfiguration, but Jesus tells them to keep a lid on what they just saw (other disciples).<sup>2</sup>

Yet on this first Palm Sunday, everything changes as Jesus enters Jerusalem like He owns the place as His Messiahship is (for the first time) openly displayed for all to see. And the crowds that are there pick up on what is taking place. Matthew tells us that [\(slide.17\)](#) most of those who were there spread their cloaks on road, and others cut branches from the trees so they might, in effect, create a red carpet fit for royalty. The other Gospel accounts include other details. They speak of the waiving of palms, and of the religious leaders getting all cranky, and of men, women, and children declaring with loud voices that Jesus as king of all.<sup>3</sup> All four Gospels (including Matthew's) tell us that [\(slide.18\)](#) the people began shouting:

*Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest!*

These words were not ideas made up on the fly. Rather, they were taken directly from [\(slide.19\)](#) Ps 118:25-26. James led us in a reading of that same psalm earlier in our service. Psalm 118 is a psalm of praise that glorifies God for His faithfulness—for His covenant love and for His deliverance. The word [\(slide.20\)](#) *hosanna* used here does not mean "yahoo!" or "hip, hip hooray." No, the word means "save us!" It's an ardent, passionate, unbridled plea for liberation/justice/salvation.<sup>4</sup> And yet, for the crowd that was there on that first Palm Sunday, that salvation (more than anything) was a *political* salvation—a salvation from Roman oppression and domination. And for that salvation to take place, a new king was needed. A king that would put an end to Caesar's sword, and to his taxes, and to his tyranny [\(slide/black.\)](#)

And in many ways, a form of this is our hope even today, regardless of whether or not we're Christians. We seek a king that will save us. And this is true even here in this country. It's odd. We live in a country that vehemently denies the need for a king (the history of our nation is literally built on this very idea) and yet, despite all of that, there is this piece of us that seeks to crown "something" and make that "something" the operating principle in our lives. And again, this is true for each of us here, whether we define ourselves as Christians or not. Each and every one of us here seeks to crown something and make it our king. Tim Keller speaks of this as a "memory trace" that is in each of us; a memory trace that (as God's creatures) is connected to

a longing for a relationship that was lost.<sup>5</sup> It points to what (slide.21) Flannery O'Connor wrote a generation ago. The idea that, while ours may no longer be a culture that is "Christ-centered," it is still a culture that is (slide.24)22 "Christ-haunted."<sup>6</sup> It's almost as if this pining for a king is written into our DNA.

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But here's the problem (slide/black.25)23. Because of the brokenness of our humanity, we by nature look for this king in the wrong places. For some of us, it's in our careers. For others of us, it's in the stuff we own or in money we've been able to stow away. For still others, it's in our politics, or in our quest for family, or in our quest for youthfulness, or (even for Christians) in our quest to keep everything stable/safe/smooth/secure. And it's not that any of these things are necessarily bad, but as we've shared before, the problem is that they're simply not big enough. They're unable to bear the full weight of who we are.

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### **The King We Need.**

But the true and better king each of us needs comes in a way that is unexpected. We see a hint of that even in the (slide.26)24 first part of the passage Kaz read. Jesus instructs two of His disciples. He tells them to go into the nearby village where they will find a donkey and her colt. The disciples are to untie them and bring them both to Jesus. I imagine they're thinking that Jesus will ride the adult donkey, and that the baby colt is there maybe so the mom won't worry or so the baby will not freak out. But that's not at all what happens. In fact, the opposite is the case. Mark's (slide.26)25 account of this story tells us that Jesus rode, not on the adult donkey, *but on the baby colt!* What's Jesus doing? Matthew tells us that Jesus is (slide.28)26 fulfilling prophecy, specifically Zech 9.

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Zechariah 9 speaks of a conquest and of a triumphal procession, but it speaks of it in a way that is unexpected and a far cry from processions that were common in the Roman Empire. Say what you might about ancient Rome, but the history books tell us that Romans knew how to enter a city (slide.29)27. The king would ride in a magnificent chariot pulled by the finest horses that could be found. He would wear a robe that was over the top. Alongside of him would be placards listing the details of his conquest. Elephants would lumber along, dancers would dance, trumpeters would blast their horns, the spoils of war would be on display.<sup>7</sup> In contrast (slide/black.30)28, the portrait painted by the Gospel writers is vastly different, and as is almost always the case in the pages of Scripture, there's a reason why.

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There's a Protestant theologian, his name is (slide.32) Stanley Hauerwas; he teaches at Duke Divinity School. In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, he makes this observation. He writes that both Zechariah 9 and the Gospel accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem are examples of the "upside-down kingdom" portrayed in the Bible; they serve as deliberate parodies of the understanding of power, not only as seen in the first century, but also as seen throughout human history—even today (slide/black.30). After all, what do we see in the redemptive work of this Christ were commemorating both today and over these next seven days?

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We see Him enter Jerusalem, not on a fearsome warhorse but a baby donkey.  
We see conquest, not through a force of arms but through the surrender of power on the cross.  
We see salvation, not through strength or human effort but through the free grace Mark spoke of.  
We see redemption reserved, not for the strong/capable but extended even to the flawed/weak.  
We see a king coming to save, not by taking power/killing, but by surrendering power/dying.<sup>8</sup>  
It's a victory, but it's a victory that no one anticipated.

Our bank accounts won't save us. Our careers won't save us. The size of our homes or families won't save us. Our politics won't save us. After all, none of these things can die for our sins. But it's also true that our ability to be good and decent and nice to others won't save us; not really. These things might make our day go a bit better and keep our blood pressure in check, but they won't save us. **Only Jesus can save us.** Only Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, resurrected, and ascended can save us and bring us the reconciliation we desperately need—not only with God, but also with each other.

This Jesus who *out of love* paid the price to set us free.  
This Jesus who *in lament* lost the presence of the Father so we might have it forever.  
This Lord who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.  
This Lord who does not change, yet changes everything.  
The secret is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances.

### **Our Journey Through Holy Week.**

That's why the story can never end (slide.35)31 here on Palm Sunday (as wonderful as it may be).

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No, we need (slide.36)32 Maundy Thursday, and we need (slide.37)33 Good Friday, and we need (slide.38)34 Resurrection Sunday—as well as the Ascension, Pentecost, and the consummation

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of history at the Second Coming of our Lord (slide/black.39)35. This is why, from the very beginning (especially after the period of persecution), the early church deliberately/intentionally journeyed through Holy Week, not merely intellectually like participants in a classroom, but affectively/ tangibly/viscerally as a community gathered in worship—through liturgy, music, and prayer.<sup>9</sup>

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One of the best accounts of this is found in a diary written by a Spanish nun named (slide.40)36 Egeria. Back around 380 A.D., Egeria went on a three-year pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and to our benefit all these years later, she decided to keep a diary. And in it she described how the churches in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Bethphage would celebrate Holy Week, not only through sermons, but through acts that were embodied. For example, she writes that (slide.41)37 Palm Sunday services began at a church (slide.42)38 not far from Bethphage near the Mount of Olives (where Jesus began His Palm Sunday journey). At that spot one of the Gospel accounts of the Triumphal Entry would be read. From there, the presiding bishop led (slide.43)39 the congregation down from the summit of the Mount of Olives, through the streets of Jerusalem, toward the Jerusalem church. Palms and olive branches would be waived as the people sang "Blessed is He

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*who comes in the name of the Lord.*"<sup>10</sup> Where did they get the idea to do this? They got it from the OT and from the patterned of celebration and enactment found in the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Booths, the celebration of Purim (slide/black.44)40. She similarly writes of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Day of Resurrection, and the other feast of the church calendar being similarly celebrated and enacted.

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So how might this be applied in our own day and age? I like how Jeremy Begbie puts it. He writes of our need to walk through the story in real time and of our need to let the events sink in. The idea of experiencing Maundy Thursday as Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday as Good Friday, and not as "mini-Easter sermons." It's interesting, here's Begbie; he's a Protestant. But here's what he has to say; he writes that (slide.44)41:

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As the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions have known better than we Protestants,

the only way this extraordinary narrative of Holy Week will yield its meaning is *quite simply if we let it*. And that means playing the events at their original speed, not ours. It means living in and through the events day by day.<sup>11</sup>

After all, the Gospels (slide/black, 45)42 very deliberately invite each of us to read the story from the inside, from the perspectives of those who lived these events. We need the perspective of Easter (we need to know how the story ends), but we also need the perspective of the first-time hearer. Which is why we do Holy Week as we do. Not because we need something to do this Thursday and Friday night. Rather it is because we know that it is through the whole of Christ's story that God sets the world to rights.

This is how God outstrips the foolishness of human wisdom.

This is how God disarms the principalities and powers and triumphs over them.

This is how God saves us from our brokenness, and from Satan's power, and from ourselves.

This is how God brings us the redemption and the humanity we desperately need.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> OT reading: Ps 118:22-26 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Matt 8:4; Mark 5:43; Mark 1:25; Matt 16:20; Matt 17:9.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 19:38; John 12:13-15.

<sup>4</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 303.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, "Worship: Palm Sunday" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction* (T. F. Gossett), 1958; cf. Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 37. Note: Flannery's original quote focused specifically on the South, but it certainly applies to the whole of culture.

<sup>7</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, NIVAC, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, BTC (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 181-83; cf. Timothy Keller, "Into Jerusalem" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> In case you're curious, Holy Week and Easter celebrations date back at least to the second century. Melito of Sardis' *Homily on the Pascha* mid-second-century sermon characterizes the celebration as one that was, by that time, pretty well-established. Interestingly, while Tertullian's (AD 160-225) *On Fasting* is critical of the practice of celebrating Easter, it also provides evidence that the feast continued to gain ground. Martin Connell, *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*. vol. 1 (New York/London: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2006), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 116; Ruth, Steenwyk, and Witvliet, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: Worship in Fourth-Century Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 53.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). 279; cf. Begbie, "Theology Transposed: "Living (in) Waves" (lecture, Regent College, 2006).