



"Let's Worship the King"

John 12:1-19

April 2, 2023

This morning's message is titled "Let's Worship the King."

As I was preparing this week, I was taken back to the early 1980s. The Saltzmann family was on vacation up in Pismo Beach, California, in the month of July. I remember that because we were there for my dad's birthday. We as a family went out on the evening of his birthday to a very nice steakhouse to celebrate. It was a place called F. McLintocks, which is still there. My mom must have secretly told the waiter that it was my dad's birthday because at the end of the meal, out came the wait staff who were carrying an ice-cream Sunday that was aglow with a birthday candle, and all were singing happy birthday.

They proceeded to take that very special ice cream Sunday and place it right down in front of my kid brother, Lance. And they went on to sing happy birthday to my kid brother, Lance! They took out an old polaroid camera and snapped a picture of Lance and in that picture, he looked just like he does at the back of the church right now; with that same grin on his face. I think that Lance really got a kick out of that incident. My dad, I'm not so sure!

So if you are going to celebrate a birthday, you must make sure that you have the right person! And if we are going to worship Jesus, let us seek discernment in the Holy Spirit to make sure that we are worshipping the right Jesus in a world of false options.

This morning we are gathered to worship Jesus in the Holy Spirit. We are here to worship the King for who He truly is and for what He truly has done. We are to worship Him in spirit and in truth. We are not to worship in our own adaptations of who He is, or our revisions of what He has done, or our assumptions about what He will do.

We want to worship Christ in spirit and in truth, and the Gospel of John was given to that end; that we might believe in Christ—the Christ of history; the Christ of redemption; the real Jesus. The Gospel of John was given to us as an historical document to help us see to Jesus and to bring us faith in Him. And coming to faith in Him, just as Thomas in the climactic moment after the resurrection, declared to Him, "My Lord and my God."

To help us this morning, two portraits of praise and worship are set before us. Both of them are happy occasions. The reverberations of the raising of Lazarus were still being felt.

There was still wonder in the atmosphere. The power of that great miracle, the seventh miracle of seven miracles recorded in the Gospel of John, was still being felt in the two scenes that unfold before us.

First, John's Gospel will take us to a very thankful dinner party that was given in honor of Jesus. Then it is going to take us to a very joyful public procession of praise for Jesus—that public parade of praise that we remember on Palm Sunday as the Triumphal Entry.

Both of these scenes carry a great measure of joy, but I want to let you that only one of them hits the nail right on the head. One will be a portrait of pure devotion as Mary of Bethany stopped the scene with a very solemn moment of lavish worship and generosity to Jesus; an offering of great praise.

The other is a portion of Scripture that has so much truth in it as Christ Jesus is in fact the King, but there is some misguided zeal in the hearts of the people that were proclaiming Him as such. And this helps us to measure ourselves. Are we seeing Jesus rightly because there on that first Palm Sunday, I will argue that most of the people were not. And we need to be asking ourselves, “Who is Jesus real? What is He really doing that we might praise Him rightly?”

So we have these scenes before us. In the midst of them, I am praying that the Holy Spirit will help us as individuals and as a church to know Jesus and to worship Him rightly.

To help us worship Jesus in truth, first we have:

1. A Portrait of Lavish Devotion (12:1-12)

This is exemplary in that we might worship Him with such lavish praise and expressions of giving to the Lord.

Let's see the scene in John Chapter 12, starting in Verse 1:

¹Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was , whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor? ⁶He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

So we see Jesus receiving and defending Mary's moment of worship to Him. We see the beauty of it in Verse 3.

³Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

It was as though the Apostle John could still smell the aroma of the perfume filling that room on that day. Certain fragrances, they can trigger so much nostalgia, even decades after we first smelled them. I wonder if any of you have ever noticed that. Certain smells, they will just take you somewhere.

I remember during our newlywed years, Kristy and I lived in our first home, a townhome in Los Alamitos. Kristy got a peach scented candle, and that candle was in the window of the kitchen. We had it going all of the time and now whenever I smell a peach scented candle, it takes me back to that townhome and that phase in our lives, and it is such a sweet thing.

Well, the smell of nard perfume took John back to that dinner party. The party was given to honor and celebrate the life of Lazarus, yes, who was dead and in the grave for four days. Then, behold, there he was again alive and probably looking better than he had looked in a very, very long time.

But above all, the dinner party was gathered to thank Jesus, to give praise to Christ, to declare gratitude to the One who restored the life of Lazarus. The disciples were there, along with other people. But there was Lazarus at table, fellowshiping with Jesus. Oh how we want to know what they were talking about. That is not recorded here, but maybe someday we will find out.

And Martha was also there. I think she was there in her happy place, serving the dinner, getting things going. They probably had all of the food on the common table, and I picture Martha like, "Jesus goes first! Let Him be the one to dip into those bowls first." I see her hovering over Him, saying, "Jesus, have more. Take some more!" Expressing her love in that way.

Then Mary did something very dramatic. Astonishing is probably the word that we should use, because she was in possession of a full pound a very precious, fragrant ointment. It was kind of like a lotion that was derived from pure nard. This was a rare perfume imported from Northern India. It was derived from a flowering plant in the honeysuckle family. It had a sweet scent and would have had an amber color.

It would have been a small treasure. It was pointed out in this text that it was valued at around 300 denarii. That would have been an entire year's income for a day laborer. So if you were to take a low-end calculation of a full year of minimum wage employment, fulltime in the state of California, we are talking about somewhere in the realm of \$37,000. \$37 grand!

How did Mary have possession of this? Some suggest that it was a family heirloom. Some suggest that it could have been a family investment. Some would have understood this to be her dowry. And she was so thankful to Jesus that she took it and she poured it out on His feet, anointing Him. Loving Him. Thanking Him.

Mary poured the nard out and the quantity of it was so great that John remembered how the whole house was filled with its fragrance. And if that were not enough, she unfettered her hair publicly. In that culture, that did not happen. She unfettered her hair and took her hair to the feet of Jesus, completely the anointing and drying them and tenderly caring for them. There was so much love that filled her heart and that room.

Brothers and sisters, here before us we have the picture of Spirit-filled worship. Worship that gives with generous, loving sacrifice to King Jesus. It is the kind of worship that is perceptive of who He is—that He is the resurrection and the life. That He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. That He is the King. That He is the Lord, and He is the Lord!

Somehow Mary was perspective that Jesus was approaching the end of His life. She knew that the Pharisees were coming heavy upon Him. And she was so thankful for all that He had done, all that He would do, and she gave to Jesus the gift of her love and her devotion. This was Spirit-filled worship.

Let us understand that this gift was not given to earn His favor. She already had it in full measure. This was given in response to the favor of Christ that she was living in. She did not give that gift to purchase salvation or to try and purchase standing in God's sight or for a place in His Kingdom, because she already had it.

Her gift was not given to purchase anything. It was given in view of what Christ had given her, which was a place in His Eternal Kingdom. Forgiven. Cleansed. Holy before the sight of the Lord forevermore, and Mary was thankful and her heart overflowed and she expressed it through her gift that the Spirit of God prompted from her.

Later the Apostle John would write in his epistle of I John Chapter 4 and Verse 19, "We love because He first loved us." In that great fourth chapter of John, he was talking about the love of God which first and foremost manifested in the fact that Jesus was the sacrifice for our sin.

We love because God first loved us. We love one another and we love the Lord back out the overflow of the love of Jesus filling our hearts in the power of the Holy Spirit. This scene is a portrait of it.

Understand that what we have before us here in this text, it is a work of the Spirit of God. We see the fallen heart left to itself in Judas Iscariot. The natural tendency is to grip and to hold on; this greed to get more for ourselves, even if it means stealing.

This is the inclination of the human heart but as our view of Jesus is purified by the Spirit and enlarged and as more of the Spirit is filling our hearts, He helps our hearts to change and our hands to open up so that we give out of love that is prompted from within, cheerfully, even with exhilaration as it says in the Bible. This is the work of the Spirit.

This kind of generosity is going to be different for different people. With Mary of Bethany, she had the ointment and she was being triggered by the power of Heaven above to wash the feet of Jesus with it. There was another time when Jesus was watching closely as offerings were being given, and the one that He was most impressed with was the widow's mite. She gave to the Lord with gratitude from what she had to give.

So we see this picture and we pray, asking God to purify our hearts by a work of His Spirit; to purify our vision of Jesus to truly see how much He loves us. As all of this is taking place within, the soul is triggered to do what it is designed to do, and that is to worship God and to be generous and to give, and to find joy in the Lord by doing that which the supernatural power of God is overcoming, namely our greed. It is a work of the Lord.

Ask for it. How come I always come back to this prayer? “Change my heart, O God. Change my heart. Forgive my selfish tendencies, and help me to see the glory of the Messiah and the great joy of giving to Him and to His purposes and to His people.” We don’t have Christ incarnate in front of us like Mary did. Jesus even pointed that out. That was a very special and unique moment.

But the principal of giving is at the heart of worship as it continues on through the ages, we still give in the power of the Holy Spirit as an aspect of worship. So how can we follow in this example of giving? This kind of worship?

I don’t know about you but I have the tendency to respond joyfully to those who love those whom I love. When I hear people saying nice things about my boys or my wife or my church, I’m very happy about it. We don’t have Jesus here in the flesh, we will one day, but we have Jesus here in the Spirit and we can love Jesus by loving those whom Jesus loves. So we give in these ways.

Give to the church! Give to the body of Christ. The church is called the body of Christ, and it is pleasing to the Lord when His people give to the purposes of the church. We can give to missionaries who are spreading the knowledge of His Name throughout the earth, locally and abroad. We can give in the power of the Spirit, knowing that this is a pleasing fragrance unto the Lord.

Now it says here in this text that Jesus told the disciples who were objecting, “You won’t always have me here, but the poor you will always have with you.” Jesus was not being dismissive of our need to care for the poor.

Going into Ephesians Chapter 4, the Apostle Paul said, “Let everyone of you work hard with your hands so that you will have the ability to give to someone in need.” And when the love of Jesus is filling our hearts, He is going to prompt our hands to open up and to give and to provide for people who are struggling.

We just need to say, “Lord, open my eyes. Who can I help give to?” Because at the heart of worship, prompted by the Spirit of God, there is this kind of generosity and it is so very pleasing to the Lord.

So we have this beautiful portrait of praise that is set before us. Now, please ask the Lord to prompt your heart and to lead you in how you can follow in our dear sister Mary’s example, as the Spirit is calling you to do so in ways that He has designed for you.

Moving forward, we are reminded once again that the reverberations of the seventh sign of the Gospel of John were still buzzing through the text and through the city of Bethany and even Jerusalem. We are reminded that were hostile opponents of Jesus. We are reminded of how insane those hostile to Jesus could be.

And we are reminded once again that we need God to change our hearts in what it says next as we finish up this point.

⁹When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

We tend to think that there would be a one to one correspondence to seeing an undeniable miracle and coming to faith in Christ. That is simply not true. Jesus stormed the land of Israel with miracle after miracle, yet there were so many who were diametrically opposed to Him.

The Pharisees had seen miracles. They knew miracles and the reality of them. Then they had Lazarus who was dead, buried four days and he was alive and well. So how were they going to deal with that?

Lazarus was not a zombie. He was not a ghost. He was not an aberration. He was alive. He was eating and doing well, so what was their solution? “Now obviously we have to put him to death too.” Talk about destroying the evidence! That was their approach.

So understanding this, we praise God for the demonstration of His authority throughout history, His authority over the natural properties that He created this world with. And He does have power to intervene and disrupt the natural laws anytime He wants to.

But the act of God that we need most badly is the transformed heart. The heart is at enmity with God. Invaded by the Spirit of Jesus, we are convicted of sin, so that we understand our guilt before the holiness of God, and then we see the love that is given in the one and only Savior.

This is the forgiveness, the mercy, and the newness of life that is given through Jesus Christ our Lord. We need transformed hearts and this, brothers and sisters, is a work of God. We all need to say, “Lord, help me to see rightly. Help my hard heart to be soft. Help my dead heart to beat again.”

Now sometimes even those who want to honor Jesus can get mistaken notions in their heads about what Jesus has done, who He is, and what He is doing. So that takes us to the second scene of worship that we have laid out before us in this Sacred Text, helping us to worship King Jesus rightly.

To help us worship Him rightly, now we have:

2. A Portrait of Misguided Zeal (12:12-19)

There was all kinds of fervency, but not all of that fervency was with pure understanding. So moving forward into John Chapter 12, starting in Verse 12, we see this picture:

¹²The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” ¹⁴And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵”Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

I think it is possible that somebody might be saying, “Jeff, what is misguided about this? Misguided zeal? What’s misguided about this picture? Christ has come in the name of the Lord, hasn’t He? That is what they were declaring.”

Yes, Christ has come in the name of the Lord. They declared Christ as King of Israel. Yes, Christ is King, the Ultimate Anointed One. He is King not only of Israel, but He is King of all the nations of the earth. Praise God, He is the King.

So what’s the problem? Let’s acknowledge that there is a beauty here that is wonderful, so it resonates and echoes even into our day, where we are looking to worship Jesus as King purely. But there are some things that we must understand about the picture that is unfolded here.

Let’s start with those palm branches. The people were waving palm branches. Those palm branches had great meaning in the hearts of the people there on that day. Now we are here in sunny Southern California and live in the same Mediterranean climate with palm trees everywhere.

I don’t know about you but when I think about palm trees, I think of them in terms of resort living and having it made in the shade, with the sound of the breeze in the fronds on the palm trees. I have my toes in the sand as I’m chilling in the shade. Summer time and the living is easy.

But that is not what they would have been thinking about. We think of resort living, but they were thinking of something totally different. For First Century Jewish people and for the Jewish people that preceded them in decades and centuries prior, the palm was a symbol of nationalistic zeal and even militarism.

Looking at the historical context here, when the temple was rededicated after the Maccabean revolt against Greece and they resisted successfully, the people took palm branches and waved them with celebration and enthusiasm over the victory that they had been given.

During the major revolts against Rome, images of palms were stamped onto coins and minted by the resisting parties. So, it was very general knowledge that palms were symbolic of nationalistic hope and yearning for freedom.

To take a picture from Twenty-First Century United States of America equivalence might be something like this: Imagine Jesus entering into Washinton D.C. and as He did, they struck up the music of Hail to the Chief, the presidential song. And Old Glory was waving everywhere. Think of Jesus draped in the Stars and Stripes. That is the kind of picture that we have before us from the Jewish lens.

Here in the Gospel of John, the miracle working power of Christ had stirred the people into a nationalistic frenzy. This also happened back in John Chapter 6, when Jesus fed the five-thousand. The people saw this miraculous power, and it says in John 6:15 that in response to that, they tried to make Jesus king by force, and Jesus scurried off.

And now we have this crowd, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna!” This means, “Save now. Save now. Save now.” But the atonement was not what they had in mind. They did not mean, “purify us. Cleanse us by the shedding of Your blood.” That is not what they had in mind when they cried, “Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna!”

They meant, “Rid the nation of these Gentiles pigs. Use the sword of Your mouth to destroy the oppressors. Conquer the nations and restore Israel to the glory of King David, and even exceed it.” That was the expectation. That was the nationalism of the Jewish people in that day. But that was not what Jesus was doing!

Jesus was not arriving on a warhorse to destroy Rome, Greece, or to destroy any other nation. He was arriving on a donkey, gentle and lowly, to be crucified by the Romans at the instigation of the Jews for the nations of the earth, including Israel and Rome. The very one’s that they wanted Jesus to lay waste to, are the ones that He too was dying for.

That is what He came to do, but the people did not see that. And later that same week the cries from the people of “Hosanna” would shift to the cry of “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” So much of this, brothers and sisters, is what I think of as misguided zeal.

For me, Palm Sunday is a perplexing holiday. Do you want to know something? Jesus is the King. He is the Messiah. He is the king of all the earth. The King was arriving there in to the heart of Israel in Jerusalem. Do you want to know something else? Someday Jesus is going to come back on a warhorse. Read Revelation Chapter 19.

And He is going to come back with a sword coming out of His mouth! He is going to bring judgment upon the rebellious natures of the earth. It is prophesied. When the Spirit is filling our hearts, we open our eyes to Jesus not only in His mercy in grace, but also in His justice and His power, which so very good.

But here is the thing: That is not what Jesus was doing there. Jesus was coming first on His mission of redeeming grace, laying down His life for the nations of the earth. It is a beautiful, beautiful thing.

So in view of this, we must ask ourselves a question as we seek in the Spirit to worship Jesus rightly, because Scripture warns the church in 11 Corinthians 12:4 that there is the possibility of worshipping another Jesus. Do we have a Jesus of our own design?

The people on Palm Sunday had some very, very false impressions of what Jesus was about to do, because they did not have the complete picture in view. They did not see Isaiah Chapter 53 that declares Jesus to be the Lamb led to the slaughter. That is what happened here. So we too need to say, “Lord, how we need You to purify our vision and give us a biblical clear, accurate understanding of who Christ is in the fullness of His being and purpose.”

Sometimes Scriptures describes God’s people with the imagery of pottery. He is the Potter, we are the clay and He molds us into His image. But the human tendency is to get that backwards. Instead of presenting themselves to Christ as the clay, they see Jesus as the clay and they mold Jesus into their own image. People see themselves as the potter and Jesus as the clay. As a result, the landscape is filled with many different versions of Jesus. Other Jesus’. False Jesus’.

We shape Jesus in the way that fits our cause. We take up His Name and we attach it to whatever agenda we have while missing His. That happens so frequently.

This week I read an article by a man named Daniel Darling. I don’t know anything about him, except for this article. I think this article was based on a book that he wrote, and it was dealing with this issue.

Darling was looking at the landscape and he identified a whole assortment of false messiahs that are rampant in Western Society. Some of them are really, really interesting to me and I have to look at them humbly, saying which one might I have a propensity toward, instead of the true Jesus who is the Alpha and the Omega, Lion and Lamb, holy, holy, holy, gentle and lowly, the true Jesus.

Some of the Jesus’ Darling wrote about are: Guru Jesus, who stands beside such figures as Buddha and Gandhi, kind of dispensing sage-like wisdom for the people of the world, but nothing more. There is the Red-Letter Jesus, and he is to be understood as the Jesus-only Jesus; the Jesus that is unhitched from the wrathful Old Testament and the Jesus that is much more likeable than what the Apostle Paul teaches, which in the eyes of many should be recognized as antiquated. So the Jesus-only Jesus kind of unhitches Him from both the prophets and the apostles. That is a false Jesus.

There is Braveheart Jesus, also known as the John Wayne Jesus. Tough guy Jesus. There is the American Jesus who is kind of like the red, white and blue Jesus. There Left-Wing Jesus, who is heralded for all the social causes on that side of the aisle. There is Self-help Jesus, Prosperity Jesus. It is kind of hard to even read these because we want to honor the true Jesus, but there are so many false Jesus’.

There is the BFF Jesus. My co-pilot. My buddy. BFF Jesus is the subject of many modern and some old praise songs too, that sound more like a Taylor Swift song than a song of praise to the Almighty, Invisible, Immortal, holy, holy, holy, All-powerful Creator of Heaven and Earth, who burns with anger against sin and who came into the world on a mission of mercy to forgive sinners.

Jesus is King over Heaven and is King over Hell. The King! The Lord! The Messiah! True God of very God. Man of very man. Jesus, God Incarnate. I think it was a man name Voltaire who once said, “God created us in His image and we have returned the favor.” We have not, but that is what human seek to do.

Let’s not just talk about the big bad world out there, although the world out there is big and bad as Scripture testifies to. But we were saved out of the world. We have the same propensity that we are still battling today, and we need to say, “Lord, help us to see Jesus rightly that we might worship Him truly and represent Him faithfully.”

So, brothers and sisters, we ask, we pray, we understand that true biblical Christianity, it is inescapably a studious Christianity. What did Jesus call His followers? Disciples! What do disciples do? They learn, then they become apostles who help others learn.

Let’s go before the Lord, saying, “Father, there is a fallen and sinful tendency for me to be apathetic about the truth of Your Word. Ignite me with hunger for Scripture; to know Jesus as He truly is; to desire teaching, even to desire to teach; to desire reading and listening.” Because at the heart of it, Christianity is a studious faith, and praise God that Jesus sent into our hearts the One that He called, the Teacher; the Spirit of God who helps us to perceive and understand.

What hope we have here in Verse 16:

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first

They had the same perception of what Palm Sunday was as the people that had all that nationalist zeal and who were expecting the crushing of Rome right then and there. The disciples were whipped into that same frenzy.

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.

They remembered that He was entering as the Lamb to be slain on that occasion. Then the passage finishes with this:

¹⁷The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said

to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

There was the portrait of frustration that we saw last week and here is another portrait of frustration. The enemies of Jesus were frustrated. They were consternated. Nothing could stop Him. We like it when it is like this. We like it when the world says that nothing can stop the progress of the church. I like that. It appears that Jesus was winning here, right?

And Jesus is always winning, but let’s keep in mind this too: In less than a week from the vantage point of this text, everything would be taking a dramatic turn. Jesus knew this. Soon He would be mocked, ridiculed, and manhandled by the Sanhedrin. Soon He would be lampooned by the soldiers. He would be flogged, insulted and crucified.

But in all this, Christ will be winning still. Still doing exactly what He intended to do. Waging war over the worst of enemies—sin, Satan, and death. He would be surging forward, redeeming, atoning, cleansing, paying debts, satisfying righteousness, purchasing people for His Kingdom. Hail to the King! The King was arriving and He was doing the most glorious work in the redemption of sinners like us.

So, let’s ask God that we might praise Him rightly as He truly is, for what He has truly done and not our own adaptations or our own revisions or our own assumptions. Let’s worship Him with lavish generosity of time, talent, and treasure. Let’s worship Him with a biblical view of His death, resurrection, and His eternal reign.

Let’s close with prayer.