

The World Has Gone After Him
John 12:12-19
March 24, 2024, Palm Sunday
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read John 12:12-19

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction

The Academy Awards happened a couple weeks ago. You may not know or care, and usually very few people in my family watch any of the ceremony. But this year, we were all tuned in, and it had nothing to do with how many Oscars Barbenheimer would receive. We were watching because my niece, Madeleine, was going to be a seat-filler. So we played our own version of "Where's Waldo?" during the majority of the ceremony trying to spot her in the audience. Madeleine is on staff with Reformed University Fellowship at the University of Southern California, having moved to Los Angeles from Oklahoma three years ago. She loves movies and apparently a fellow member of her church in LA is a member of the Academy and nominated her to be a seat-filler. If you're not familiar with that term: the people who run the Oscars don't like when there are empty seats as the camera looks out over the audience. So when someone goes to the bathroom or has to be on stage, a seat-filler will do exactly that: sit in their seat for them.

My sister-in-law texted us a picture of what Madeleine would be wearing, but I was thinking, "No way will we see her; she'll be in the balcony or the back for a couple of segments, but it's unlikely we'll spot her live on TV." Oh, ye of little faith. Within the first half hour, the award for "Best Animated Short" was announced, and as the camera picked out the winners in the crowd, there was Madeleine sitting a few seats over. She apparently had been among the most fortunate of volunteers because she had been handed a ticket for an unclaimed seat, so she stayed the same place for the whole ceremony. On the fourth row! Right down the aisle from Martin Scorsese, right behind John Mulaney, and in front of Paul Giamatti, if those names mean anything to you. She was sitting right next to Valerie Bertinelli and her son, Wolfgang. If you don't recognize those names, maybe you recognize her ex-husband and his father - the late, great Eddie Van Halen. Valerie was a TV star in the 80s, and Madeleine said that she introduced herself, "Hi, I'm Valerie," but that Madeleine didn't know who she was. Overall, she said it was an unbelievable experience, especially for someone not connected to Hollywood in any way, shape, or form.

The first few months of each year is generally referred to as "Awards Season," as the People's Choice Awards, the Golden Globes, the Emmys, the Grammys, the BAFTAs, and more happen. It's a reminder that there are a lot of artistic people creating music, film, and media that like to give each other awards and be recognized for their work. For some of those people, it will be their proverbial "15 minutes of fame," while for others with names like DeNiro, Streep, and Spielberg, they have a long career of fame and success. Reflecting on the nature of fame, someone like Valerie Bertinelli is a good example of someone who was very famous when I was growing up, she was "America's Sweetheart" who married the greatest rock guitarist ever. But here we are forty years later, and my kids' generation has no idea who she is; she's just a mom proud of her rockstar son.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Fame is proof that people are gullible." The Italian poet, Dante, said, "Worldly fame is but a breath of wind that blows now this way, and now that, and changes name as

it changes direction.”¹ Today’s passage looks at someone who had achieved a huge level of fame in His day. We’ll see Him honored by the crowds who were whipped up into a frenzy by the work that He had been doing and by the expectations of what He could achieve. But this Man would only take fame on His own terms, and He failed to let it derail Him from the mission that He had been sent on. And though His life would be cut short, He would not just be a temporary celebrity, famous today but forgotten tomorrow. Far from fading into obscurity, Jesus Christ is the most famous person in all of history not because He gave into the crowds’ demands but because He pursued His mission with unrelenting determination. Today’s sermon will be connected to Friday night’s and next Sunday morning’s sermons to give us a fuller picture of what Jesus accomplished with His life, death, and resurrection.

The first two verses of this passage set the scene with an emphasis on

I. Palms and Psalms (vv. 12-13)

¹² *The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.*

¹³ *So 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!”*

We come to this passage without much context since we’re not preaching through the Gospel of John. It starts with the date indication: “*the next day.*” The next day after what? If we back up to the beginning of the chapter, verse 1 says “*six days before the Passover.*” There were three festivals or feasts at which Jews of that day were expected to be present in Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Passover was the most solemn of those, reminding each generation of the great events of Moses’ day when God put the firstborn sons of Egypt to death while passing over the Israelite homes that bore the sign of the lamb’s blood on their doorposts. Passover would be celebrated on Friday of that week, so this story happens on Sunday. The day before, Saturday, saw Jesus eating dinner with his disciples at the home of the three siblings Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. This was shortly after what big event? Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus had been laying low because He knew that the Pharisees and priests wanted to find Him and have Him killed – verse 54 of the last chapter said, “*Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews.*” But Jesus wasn’t their only target, verse 11 says: “*So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.*” The Jewish leaders wanted Lazarus dead because he was living proof of Jesus’ power.

So the big question was: will Jesus show up at the Passover feast? He could have avoided Jerusalem completely and carried on with His ministry for many years, certainly His disciples had urged Him to do that. But to be faithful to His heavenly Father’s plan, He knew that He had to be there. So He had two options if He didn’t want to be arrested as soon as He got arrived: either sneak around Jerusalem and avoided being detected or make Himself so obvious that nobody would dare arrest Him in front of the crowds. It would, of course, be the latter option: a huge spectacle entering the holy city where all of His enemies were waiting for Him. J.C. Ryle states it this way:

“The time had come at last when Christ was to die for the sins of the world. The time had come when the true Passover Lamb was to be slain, when the true blood of atonement was to be shed, when Messiah was to be ‘cut off’ according to prophecy when the way into the holiest was to be opened by the true High Priest to all mankind. Knowing this, He placed Himself prominently under the notice of the whole Jewish nation... His remarkable public entry into Jerusalem... had caused the eyes of all Israel to be specially fixed upon Himself.”²

¹ <https://www.wonderfulquote.com/l/quotes-about-fame>

² J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John, 3 vols.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), vol. 2, p. 365.

The large crowd that had already arrived in Jerusalem came out of the city and greeted Jesus while He was on His way there, hailing Him with palm branches. The palms were not a random idea that someone decided at the last second: “Here, looks like we have a bunch of palms by the road, that will be fun to use those.” No, there was precedent for greeting their heroes that way. In the second century BC, what we call the “intertestamental time” between the Old and New Testaments, the Greek leader, Antiochus IV, invaded Israel and desecrated the Temple. A man named Mattathias led Jewish troops against Antiochus’ army, and when he died, his son, Judas, took up the challenge. He became known as Judas Maccabeus, which means “the hammer,” and his army put so much pressure on the invaders that they backed down and allowed the Jews to practice their faith in the temple again. That victory is what they celebrate with the Feast of Lights, or Hanukkah. When Judas Maccabeus rededicated the temple altar in 164 BC, the crowd waved palm branches towards him, and later waved them also for his brother, Simon, who beat back the invading army as well. When the Jews developed their own coins even while under Roman rule, they stamped the image of the palm branch on them, because it was the national symbol of victory.³

So, when Jesus came into Jerusalem, the crowd decided this was a similar occasion. They were receiving Jesus as a military hero, a conqueror. They were hopeful that any day now, the trumpets would ring out and Jesus would take up the sword and become the new “hammer,” leading the Jewish nation to rise up and defeat their overlords, the Romans.⁴ They thought that Jesus clearly was the Man who would be leading the army because He had gathered a large following and had spread the good news of the kingdom all over Israel, right? Never mind that He had never carried a sword or spoken fiercely to a Roman soldier. That He had spent all of His time teaching and healing. Those were mere technicalities that could be overlooked if Jesus was finally getting His act together and bringing a battle plan with Him to lead Israel and the Jews to freedom.

The crowd recited words from Psalm 118:25-26, which says, “*Save us, we pray, O Lord! O Lord, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord.*” What you have to understand is that during the Passover feast, six Psalms #113-118 were recited and sung at the temple daily. They were known as the “Hallel” Psalms; Hallel means “praise” – Hallelujah – means “praise God.” So the fact that they were quoting part of Psalm 118 shouldn’t surprise us because it was on their mind at that time. Hosanna means “save now” – they were asking Him to defeat their earthly enemies. They thought He would be the new Moses; they had no idea that He had come to be the new Passover Lamb. And did you notice what they added when they quoted Psalm 118? They called Him “the King of Israel.” He was the King, but not the kind they were hoping for.

The next three verses give more detail that involve

II. A Donkey and a Prophecy (vv. 14-16)

¹⁴ And 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!” ¹⁶ His 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.

The other three Gospels talk about Jesus sending a couple disciples to procure a donkey’s colt for Him, but John leaves that out. He just says that Jesus “found” a young donkey and links it to the

³ R.C. Sproul, *John* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2010), p. 223.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), vol. 2, p. 136.

prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 (“*your king is coming... sitting on a donkey’s colt*”) which was written 500 years earlier. The next verse in Zechariah says, “*I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall **speak peace** to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.*” All of which communicated such a different agenda from what the assembled crowd was expecting of Jesus. If Jesus had wanted to capitalize on the crowds’ excitement and fervor to recognize Him as king, He would have ridden a war horse into Jerusalem. That would have communicated that He was a mighty, conquering king. But He had no plans to lead an army against Rome, so He sent a different message with His choice of animal: the donkey was the symbol of peace and lowliness. He was not denying being King, just not the king they wanted. Jesus does not speak at all in this passage, but He certainly sent a message with His actions.

People who try to poke holes in the Scriptural story sometimes talk about the disciples plotting things and choreographing each step that Jesus took to force it to line up with prophecy. But verse 16 tells us that the disciples didn’t have a clue how the events they were living were foretold in Scripture. It wasn’t until much later that they understood how these events fulfilled the prophecies written about long ago.⁵ God would reveal all things to them in His timing.

The last three verses shift the focus to the
III. Pharisees and Popularity (vv. 17-19)

¹⁷ The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸ The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

You might not have noticed that here are three different groups here:

- 1) Verse 17 mentions the crowd that had come from Bethany where they had witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. They were amazed at that miracle and while they were in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, it says that they “*continued to bear witness*” to what Jesus had done. They were the group that had seen and was already convinced.
- 2) Verse 18 mentions a different crowd that was already in Jerusalem who wanted to know what all the fuss was about. They were the group that went out in verse 12 with the palm branches and slogans because they heard that the miracle-worker was on His way there. This was the group that had heard and wanted to believe.
- 3) Verse 19 talks about the last group, the ones who had heard and most definitely did not want to believe. And more than that, they didn’t want anyone else to believe.

The elite religious leaders of the city, the Pharisees, were frustrated and grumbling that they were losing control of things. They didn’t literally mean that the whole world had followed Jesus, but that since Jerusalem’s population would swell to many times its usual size during the Passover celebration, it seemed overwhelming. What is striking is that the Pharisees never stopped to ask: if the whole world has gone after Him, maybe there’s something to learn there. And if Jesus really can raise people from the dead on top of healing, casting out demons, and multiplying food miraculously, maybe, JUST MAYBE, He is who He says that He is. No, they would rather hold onto their beliefs and positions of power, and eliminate the nuisance. The common people, the unwashed masses saw miracles and believed that the One doing them must have been sent from God, but the teachers of the law never made the connection, proving what blind guides they were.

⁵ Gary P. Baumler, *John : People’s Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), p. 176.

The Pharisees thought they could stop Jesus by putting Him to death, and others think that they can stop Jesus by keeping Him out. What do I mean by that? I just learned this fascinating history. There are eight gates surrounding the city of Jerusalem. The one facing the Mount of Olives through which Jesus entered the city on Palm Sunday is called the Eastern Gate. In Hebrew it is *Shar'ar Harahamim*, the "Gate of Mercy." Listen to what Ezekiel 44:1-3 says:

*"Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east. And it was shut.
2 And the Lord said to me, "This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it. Therefore it shall remain shut.
3 Only the prince may sit in it to eat bread before the Lord. He shall enter by way of the vestibule of the gate, and shall go out by the same way."*

Ezekiel was writing some 600 years before Jesus' day, and obviously that gate was not shut when Jesus rode through it into the holy city; verse 2 said that the Lord had entered by it. Now, the gate was destroyed along with the temple in AD 70 by the Romans, but eventually rebuilt. In AD 1540, a Muslim leader named Suleiman the Magnificent ordered that gate to be shut permanently, filled with sixteen feet of concrete, and it has remained shut ever since. Why? To prevent the Jewish Messiah from gaining entrance to Jerusalem.⁶ It's the fulfillment of Ezekiel's words. Unfortunately for Suleiman, the Messiah had already passed through those gates over fifteen hundred years earlier the first time He came. And the second time that He comes, no amount of concrete will keep Him out when He comes to judge the living and the dead.

Conclusion

One of the things that we find out from Luke's account of this event that John did not record is that Jesus stopped on His way to Jerusalem and wept for the city and its people. Luke 19:41-44:

"41 And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, 42 saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side 44 and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Basically, Jesus was saying that these waving palms prove that the people didn't know who He was or what He was doing. They didn't understand the peace that He had come to give them: salvation peace. Romans 5:1 tells us that *"since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* That's the true peace we need and that Jesus accomplished when He died on the cross. He took the sins of His people on Himself, paid the penalty of death and God's wrath for them, and redeemed His people once for all time. But the Israelites of His day were so set on a political or military Messiah that they couldn't grasp His mission as a spiritual Messiah. Verses 43-44 show that Jesus knew that the Romans would destroy Jerusalem in AD 70. It gave Him no joy that the city and her people would be torn down, so He wept.

The Jews were looking for salvation from the Romans not salvation from their sins. And so we should ask ourselves: are we like the crowd and have expectations for Jesus that are not in line with His mission and His purposes for us? Are you looking for something else from God than what He promises to give through Christ?

Do you want to always win at life? Jesus says that you have to lose your life to find it.

Do you want people to speak well of you? Jesus says *"blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account"* (Matthew 5:11).

⁶ <https://bible-history.com/jerusalem/golden-gate>

Are you looking for the riches of the world? Jesus says store up treasures in heaven. Do you look to God expecting or demanding a great life filled with loving family, loyal friends, a good education, a lucrative and fulfilling career, topped off with many blissful years of retirement? And if any of those areas come up short, are you disappointed or angry with God, feeling that He owes you more?

J.D. Greear said this:

“Even if we ‘get religious,’ we think mostly about how God fits into *our* life stories. We want to figure out what we need to do to get him orbiting us so that we get the blessings of his presence. You could summarize the collective prayer requests of most religious people in the world this way: ‘God, this is what I need. God, bless this, fix that, smite him. God, you didn’t do this, so I’m mad at you. In fact, disappoint me again and I will punish you by not believing in you.’”⁷

That was ultimately the attitude of the crowd at Jesus’ triumphal entry and all too often it’s our attitude. But Jesus tells us that if we want eternal life, if we want to follow Him, we have to submit to His plans. And His way does not involve earthly triumph, it looks a lot more like trials, humility, and defeat. The glory comes after this life. And those who are faithful, obey, and persevere will be blessed beyond measure.

Richards Phillips reminds us that “the crown that Jesus came to wear was not a crown of gold but of thorns. The throne that He came to ascend was a cross.”⁸ The huge expectations for Jesus as the conquering political king would come crashing down when he was arrested four days after His victory parade. And when Pilate asked the crowd who they would like to have released from custody – Barabbas, a notorious outlaw murderer, or Jesus – they chanted Barabbas’ name. When Pilate asked what to do with Jesus, they chanted “Crucify Him!” So Jesus was sent to die on a hill nailed to a cross for crimes that He did not commit. It was not the death that a King should have undergone, but it was the One that had been planned by God to save His people from their sins and bring them spiritual peace. Come back Friday night to get the fuller story of what happened on that day and that cross, and why it is the greatest thing that could have happened for you and me. Let’s pray.

Benediction

1 Chronicles 29:11-13 - *“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is Yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all. In Your hand are power and might, and in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank You, our God, and praise Your glorious name.”*

⁷ J.D. Greear, *Essential Christianity: The Heart of the Gospel in Ten Words* (The Good Book Company, 2023), p. 40.

⁸ Richard D. Phillips, *John, Vol. 2: Chapter 11-21* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), p. 89.