

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Palm Sunday – March 16th, 2008

Zechariah 9:9-10

- ⁹ Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**
- ¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses 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.**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Frederick the Great, King of Prussia from 1740-1786, once invited some important people to his royal table, including his top ranked generals. One of them by the name of Hans von Zieten declined the invitation because he wanted to partake of communion at his church. Some time later, at another banquet, Frederick and his guests mocked the general for his religious scruples and made jokes about the Lord's Supper. After so much of this, in what could only be described as great peril to losing his position, if not his life, the officer stood to his feet and respectfully addressed the monarch. "My lord, there is a greater King than you, a King to whom I have sworn allegiance even unto death. I am a Christian man, and I cannot sit quietly as the Lord's name is dishonored, His character belittled, and His cause subjected to ridicule. With your permission, I shall withdraw." As von Zieten awaited a response, the other generals trembled in silence knowing that such words could result in their colleague being executed for insubordination. But to their surprise Frederick grasped the hand of his general, asked for his forgiveness, promised that he would never again make light of sacred things, and requested that he remain.

What prompted such loyalty and courage? The general himself gave the answer. He was a Christian man and as such he had a heavenly King to whom he gratefully owed his first allegiance. For him, there were kings – and then there was *the* King... What was true of Hans von Zieten is true of every other Christian. Today, on this Palm Sunday, we'd like to talk about our King. His name is Jesus Christ. And He is indeed

Sermon theme: The King Above All Kings

- 1. His character**
- 2. His achievements**

Before we get into our text, let me provide a thought or two on its historical background and context. God's instrument for delivering these words to His Old Testament people was the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah's work spanned a long period of time, but if we're looking for a date we can place him around the year 500 BC. It was a time when some of God's people had just recently returned from a 70-year captivity in the land of Babylon. They were busy reestablishing themselves in their homeland of Israel. They were also enjoying a certain measure of freedom. But the fact of the matter was that from this time on their freedom would never really last for more than just relatively short periods of time.

Consequently, the comforting words of our text do not have a political meaning, but a great spiritual meaning. Through these words of Zechariah, God is telling His people to look forward and find strength in what was to come. No matter what the physical circumstances of God's people may be, they will never be overrun spiritually, because they have a powerful leader. When this leader comes, he will make all things

right. He'll bring peace to the hearts of those who know him, and eventually, at the conclusion of all things, that peace will extend throughout eternity. This is reason for God's people to rejoice.

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Zechariah calls him a king. We know Him to be Jesus Christ. And today, in direct fulfillment of this Old Testament prophecy, He rides into Jerusalem. Notice how He is described. First of all, He is a **righteous** king. What do you think of when you hear the word "righteous" attached to an individual? We probably think of one who does no wrong, one who is just and fair and without a hint of corruption. But for humans, this is always a general statement, because even the most "righteous" among us is still a sinner.

When it comes to Jesus, however, this is not a general statement. It is an *absolute* statement. Jesus *is* perfectly righteous. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that our King Jesus Christ was like us in every way but with one exception: He never sinned. Living out this sinless righteousness is part of what He came to do as our substitute. God asks us to be sinless and righteous, but we can't do it. We sin. So God, in a profound act of love far beyond our understanding, sent His Son, Jesus, to do in our place what we cannot do: be perfectly righteous. Theologians sometimes refer to this as the "active obedience of Christ."

God also said that the soul that sins is the soul that shall die. Again, that's us. So after *living* perfectly as our substitute, Jesus then – again, willingly and voluntarily – *died* as our substitute. We refer to this as the "passive obedience of Christ." That's why He's riding into Jerusalem today. By week's end He's going to be on a cross. But no one took Jesus' life. He *gave* it. Zechariah clues us in on what this righteous life and death translate into when next he tells us our King comes to us **"having salvation."** Providing *salvation* is what Jesus Christ is all about. Salvation means we have been rescued from the damning consequences of our sin. It means we are in a right relationship with God. It means that the wall of our own sinfulness that once barred our entrance into heaven has been dismantled.

No earthly king or authority could do this for us -- only Jesus. Christ our King may not have conquered any foreign nations. He may not have ushered in the golden age of the Jewish nation as many in His day mistakenly hoped He would. And He may not have left behind any monuments like earthly kings often do. But what He did do makes all those things pale in comparison. Because He took on stronger enemies like death and the devil and He conquered them with His sinless life and death. And that is why He is truly *the* King above all kings.

Yet, look how He came to us. Zechariah continues the prophecy: He comes **"gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."** In many ways the world back then was the same as it is today. People of power and influence show it by their entourage. For example, President George W. Bush travels to many towns and cities. How do you think he gets around? I don't know for sure, but I highly doubt he arrived in an old Volkswagen mini-bus or even a standardly equipped mini-van. I'm quite sure that he arrives in a motorcade of limos or other luxurious vehicles. Since the time of great King David and his wise son Solomon, horses were the animals of royalty and military power. Donkeys were the Volkswagen mini-busses of the time. Dependable, reliable... but an earthly king would not allow himself to be seen on such an animal. Bad for one's image. But here comes Jesus. And if this isn't enough, we learn from the gospels that the donkey was borrowed. Such is the humility, the low station our King willingly accepted to carry out our redemption.

Paul in our readings for today describes Jesus' humbleness in this way, Jesus, **"Who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance**

as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross." Zechariah's prophecy continues with an explanation of what this King above all kings would achieve. **"I (God) will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses 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."** Christ came to proclaim and provide peace. What kind of peace? Earthly peace, as in no more fighting? If that's the case, Christ has failed miserably. At any given time and in any given place there is a war going on or about to go on.

The peace that Christ provides is better than that. The night before His enemies nailed Him to the cross Jesus said to His disciples and followers of all time: **"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."** The kind of peace our Lord gives us is the inner peace and tranquility of knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we are loved and cared for by God. As the hymnist put it, "Through Jesus blood and merit, I am at peace with God." And this peace is within our hearts no matter what the outside circumstances may be. No health problem, financial setback or personal tragedy can dislodge it.

Perhaps you've heard this illustration before, but even if you have, it's worth repeating. I've always liked the story of the two artists who competed with each other to see who could produce a painting that would best depict the idea of peace. One painted a picture of a quiet lake on a mountaintop. Not a breeze was stirring. Not a bird was flying. Not a ripple disturbed the quiet waters. All was perfect silence. That, in the opinion of the first artist, was the truest picture of peace. The second artist painted something quite different. On his canvass was a roaring waterfall with a mighty oak tree hanging over it. In a slightly hollowed depression on a thick branch that bent to where it was almost touching the mist, the artist painted a tiny sparrow sitting unperturbed upon her little nest. In the midst of that mighty waterfall, surrounded by what seemed to be frightful danger, that sparrow hadn't a worry in the world. Because her nest was snug in the hollow of a mighty oak tree – on a branch the water couldn't reach.

Both artists agreed that the second picture came closer to depicting the highest concept of peace. And whether they knew it or not, within that picture is an excellent illustration of the peace that our King Jesus provides for us. What Jesus gives us is not the absence of sin in our lives, but the promise of its forgiveness. What Jesus gives us is not peace from all trouble and hardship, but peace in the midst of our trouble and hardship. It's the peace of God that the Apostle Paul says **"transcends all understanding."** And it is the peace that is provided to us by the King above all kings...

Who comes riding into the city of Jerusalem today approximately 19.5 centuries ago. He may not fit the world's prototype of a king, but we know that never has a more important or powerful king walked the earth. He rides into town today to carry out the work of saving us from our sins and giving us eternal life. Five days from now this work will come to a painful climax as our Savior is nailed hand and foot to the cross. All of which brings us peace of heart and peace of mind. What do we do with such a king? At the beginning of this sermon I told you how one Christian man answered that question. Can we do otherwise? What do we do with Jesus? Love him. Honor him. Be loyal to him. And live for him. Because He is the King above all kings. Soon the divine drama resulting in our salvation will play itself out before us once again. God grant us a blessed Holy Week. Amen.