

I Have Come As Light
Easter 2018
John 12:12-50 (selected)
March 25, 2018

It is Palm Sunday! The day that Jesus entered Jerusalem to the triumphant cheers and worship of the crowds. Palm branches were cut and laid out before him as the crowd celebrated the coming of their next king... or so many of them thought. We find the story in all four of the gospels, but this morning we are going to focus on the gospel that was written by the apostle John, Jesus' closest friend. I would guess that every one of us here this morning has heard this story, it is a favorite in Sunday school and in worship services. Often the story is told from a child's perspective as Jesus sends his disciples to get a young donkey colt that he will ride into town. There is pomp, ceremony, imagery and excitement. All these perspectives are true and good perspectives, taken directly from the words of scripture. But John tells the story from a little different angle. He isn't focused on the ceremony or the excitement of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he is focused on the claim of Jesus to be the messiah and the varied responses of the people who encountered Jesus during the weeks and days prior to the crucifixion. This morning, I want to walk you through John chapter 12. Some of it I will summarize and some of it we will work through verse by verse. I am going to be covering a lot of ground this morning, so let's fasten our seat belts, take out our Bibles and turn to John 12.

Here is the background. Lazarus was dead. Now he is alive. Jesus raised him from the dead. Because of the unbelief of many of the Jews and the Pharisees decision to kill him, Jesus had withdrawn to the town of Ephraim which was about 16 miles north of Jerusalem, not too far from Bethel. It was on the edge of the wilderness; another way of saying it was off the beaten track and Jesus could hang out here without being bothered by the Jewish officials or the large crowds that were gathering for the Passover. A good estimate of attendance at the Passover would be around a million people. The town was jammed, and it was quite a spectacle. Many of the people came to town a week early to go through purification rites so they could participate in the Passover. Speculation was running high. Would Jesus attend? Would he be arrested? Would he raise somebody else from the dead? Would he dare come near to town and take the risk of being arrested? John tells us that the Pharisees had issued an arrest order and had informed the people at the temple to report to them immediately if they saw Jesus come into Jerusalem.

Mary's Act of Love – Lazarus' Death Warrant

In the first 11 verses of chapter 12, two important things happen. First, Jesus had arrived in Bethany. It is six days prior to the beginning of the Passover. If you are paying attention, this can cause a timing issue. If you count backward six days from Friday evening, the official start of Passover, that would place Jesus in Bethany on Sunday. Yet, we believe he entered Jerusalem on Sunday, which puts the meal in Bethany on Saturday... but

that is seven days, not six. So how is that possible. Remember this. References to time and days in the Jewish culture are different than in ours. In John's thinking, the beginning of the day of the Passover would actually be on Thursday evening at sunset. This would be the "onset of Friday" which is the first day of the Passover. If we understand John's narrative in that way, Jesus was in Bethany on Saturday evening. He would enter Jerusalem the following day, Sunday.

It was here, at this meal, that Mary anoints Jesus with expensive perfume and brings the wrath of Judas upon herself. Scripture begins to unveil the dark heart of Judas, it is a warning of what is to come. On the other hand, Mary is greatly praised as Jesus rebukes Judas. It was likely this act of Mary and Jesus' response that pushed Judas over the edge to go and betray Jesus to the Pharisees.

Then, John explains that when the people heard that Jesus had come back to Bethany they came to see not only Jesus but Lazarus. Many Jews believed on account of Lazarus. So, the Pharisees signed a death order for him as well. Both Jesus and Lazarus had a bounty on their heads. Both were under an order of execution.

The next day Jesus headed out for Jerusalem. In verse 12 we see that the crowd knew he was coming. It was only two miles from Bethany to Jerusalem. Someone had run ahead and let them know. So, they cut palm branches and headed out to meet Jesus.

They cried out, *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!* Hosanna is a borrowed word, what is called a transliteration, from the Hebrew. It had become a term of praise or acclamation, but it literally means “give us salvation now.” Once again, like the statement of Caiaphas we read last week, the people are saying one thing and God was applying a very different meaning. Little did they know, but the savior of the world was entering Jerusalem and they were shouting, “Give us salvation now!”

Jesus Lifted Up

Now I would like to skip down to verses 27-36. I will begin reading in verse 27, Jesus is speaking: ²⁷ *“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour.”* ²⁸ *“Father, glorify your name.”* Then a voice came from heaven: *“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”* ²⁹ *“The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’”* ³⁰ *“Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not mine.’”* ³¹ *“Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”* ³² *“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”* ³³ *“He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”* ³⁴ *“So the crowd answered him, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?’”* ³⁵ *“So Jesus said to them, ‘The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness*

overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

Things are coming to a head. Jesus time has come. All of redemptive history has been aiming at this week, at these few days. This is the culmination of God’s plan to deal with sin. Jesus is in Jerusalem. The Pharisees are dead set opposed to him and have decided to kill him. The people are screaming “hosanna”, give us salvation now. But they have no idea what they are saying or who they are saying it to. The forces of hell are gathering. The army of heaven is on full alert and in place. It is all coming to a head.

In verse 27, Jesus says, *Now is my soul troubled*. Can you imagine why? Try to imagine the heaviness of his feelings, the excitement, the dread of taking the sin of the world onto his shoulders and experiencing the wrath of God. All of this is flowing through Jesus mind at this moment as he continues, *and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour?* Here Jesus reveals the depth of his agony. He is about to face the wrath of God, the horrors of the wrath of God, on our behalf. Let me step aside from the text for a minute and say this... we need to deeply and seriously consider what Jesus is experiencing here. He knows better than any of us what the wrath of God is like. His just, fair, well deserved wrath. It is an uncontainable fury. God hates sin and he hates those who sin against him. Contemporary church culture will teach you that God hates sin and loves

the sinner. That is a dangerous lie. God hates sinners. He is opposed to sinners. He will send every single sinner that has ever lived into the lake of fire on judgment day. This is serious business. Listen. Redeemed people, those who love Jesus and obey his commands are not sinners. They sin, but they are not sinners. They are spotless members of the family of God, forgiven of all wrong doing through sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who took the penalty of our sin upon himself so that we could bear his righteousness. Jesus is days away from going to the cross. His question is one that gives us pause. As he did in Gethsemane, he prays, “Father save me from this hour.” We must be begging for the same thing. Father save us from the hour of your judgment. Save us through Jesus.

But then, Jesus makes it clear that he knows he cannot ask to be spared because this is God’s will, this is why he came. So, he completes his prayer by saying, *But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.* Not my comfort but your will. Do not spare me but spare all who will believe in me. Jesus prays for the glory of the Father. And God answers him in a voice from heaven that only Jesus could understand. *I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*

Jesus continues in verses 30-32 as he says that God’s voice was not for his benefit, but for the sake of those in the crowd. This is the same thing he said at Lazarus’ resurrection. Jesus is training his disciples. They will think back on this when he is gone and realize that all the claims of Jesus are

true. Satan is no longer in charge. He may seem strong and difficult to resist, but Jesus has cast him out.

Then Jesus says that when he is lifted up, after he has been crucified and raised from the dead, he will draw all people to himself. Be careful here. This verse is often misapplied. Don't make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is saying that every single person in the world will follow him. This is not universal salvation. He has already told us that his glorification will be bad news for some. This is not a contradiction. "All people" means all people without distinction, not all people without exception.¹ Do you see the difference? It refers to people from all races, all colors, all nationalities, all genders. When I am lifted up from the earth, people of every race, color and creed will be raised up with me. Hallelujah. Hosanna!

A Theological Challenge

Now we come to a very challenging section of this text. It deals with unbelief and the hardening of people's hearts. This is a tough passage and something that is always going to be a bit of a mystery, so bear with me as I try to unravel it as much as possible. I have some significant help here from Don Carson, a very smart theologian in whom I have great trust. Look at verses 37-40. In the previous passage, Jesus has warned the crowd that they must walk in the light. The way to become sons of light is to walk in the light. Jesus is the light of the world.

But, Jesus knows that not all will follow him. John also knows this. Remember, John is writing his gospel account as he looks back on 50 years of ministry. He has seen many who did not believe. He was there when Jesus was crucified, when Steven was stoned, and when every one of his friends and fellow apostles were martyred for their faith. So, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, John writes the words of Isaiah, *Lord who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?* Then John says something we will struggle with, in verses 39-40... *Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.*

So, what do we do with this? John appears to be saying that these people who rejected Christ are not responsible for their unbelief because God caused them to be blind and to have hard hearts. But that would be in direct opposition to other scripture that clearly states that man is responsible for his sin and in fact is a willing participant in sin. All who sin (implied is by their own choice) have fallen short of God's glory and therefore deserve and have earned death, which is called the fair wage earned through willful disobedience to God. So, do these verses contradict other scriptures? How are we to think about this? How can God blind their eyes and harden their hearts, yet held them responsible for their sin and unbelief? Doesn't it have to be one or the other?

In these verses, John is explaining why, in light of Jesus' miracles and clear testimony to be the Messiah, there is still such catastrophic, large scale unbelief. John is making sure that the claims of Jesus are not subverted due to an apparent lack of response. John is making it clear that they could not believe... even in the face of clear evidence and proof that they should believe. Sin has blinded their eyes. God has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart. This is not a predestinarian argument that somehow trumps human responsibility. No, John is not arguing that since they are blind they are also without guilt. He is arguing just the opposite. What John is explaining here is what Carson calls "judicial hardening."

I think you will understand this clearly when I explain. The people Isaiah is referring to are those who heard his prophecies; his call for them to stop worshipping idols and trusting in themselves and turn to the one true God of Israel. They heard him and knew he was speaking the words of God, but they hated every single word he spoke to them. Every prophecy made them angrier, more rebellious, more frustrated. They didn't obey God's word at all. Their eyes were blind, their hearts were hard, and it was God himself who had hardened them through the preaching of his words of command. God's own words, spoken by Isaiah, hardened their hearts and blinded their eyes as they decided to listen to their own counsel rather than God's. Just like sanctification, hardening is an act of God in which he participates with the individual. As we cooperate with God and obey his word, God grows us into the image of Christ. As we reject the word of God

and his ultimate authority, we are choosing to reject God himself and we become progressively more blind, our hearts become harder. That is what John is telling us here, it is a grave and serious warning. Jesus' commands are clear. Walk in the light. I am the light. Resist at your own peril. God's own words will be your judge. Your rage and disobedience against the word of God will be your undoing as God's judicial hardening makes it impossible for you to believe.

And then one more challenging statement in verses 42-43. It starts in verse 42 with, "Nevertheless" or "yet despite that", many of the authorities believed. But this kind of belief is frightening because it is the kind of belief that left them fearing the Pharisees. They didn't want to be put out of the synagogue. They loved the glory of man more than the glory of God. Yikes. This should send some cold chills down your back, frankly. John makes it clear that this kind of belief is not true belief. It comes in many forms. Here is one I have encountered. If you keep up on current missions philosophy, you might be aware of something called an "insider movement." Some of the professors at the school where I did my masters studies with were into this concept. Here is the idea... if you live in a Muslim culture and come to Christ, the declaration of your faith can get you killed. At the least, it will cause you to be abandoned by your family and rejected by your friends. You will be thrown out of the mosque. So, the thought process goes, you simply change the focus of your worship as you go to the mosque and pray to Jesus instead of Allah. No need to make

a declaration or to change places of worship. Simple become part of an “insider movement.” People who remain inside the structures of Islam and substitute Jesus for Allah. There are several perceived benefits, including there being no need to be rejected or killed. Staying in the mosque also gives you a natural evangelism opportunity. There are lots of problems with this idea, but it is a growing movement in some sectors of the missions world. But, you see, this is exactly the same thought process we see in verse 42. I believe, but not enough to overcome my fear of the authorities, who have the ability to kill me. While proclaiming belief, this is actually unbelief. This is loving the acceptance of men more than the acceptance of God. This is declaring that God is not big enough to protect you or that if He wills your death as a martyr that you are not willing to do his will. This is a big deal.

I really struggle with understanding this kind of “belief”, yet it is rampant in today's church culture. People who say, "Jesus, Jesus", yet live no different than the world. People whose proclaimed belief makes little or no difference in their lifestyle, their personal pursuits, or their obedience to the commands of Christ.

Come in real close and listen; this kind of "secret faith" is not saving faith. It is not true faith at all.

The Light of the World

Finally, our Palm Sunday message ends with a massive declaration from Jesus himself. Look at verse 44. *Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in the one who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him.* Jesus is God. When you know Jesus, you know God. When you see Jesus, you see God. When you believe in Jesus, you believe in God. *I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.* Jesus is light. There is absolutely no reason to live in darkness and despair. Believe in Jesus, come out of the darkness and live. The gospel is that simple. Believe in Jesus and live. Declare Jesus as Lord and live.

In verse 47, Jesus goes on to say that he didn't come to judge the world but to save the world! John 3:17 also makes that very clear. *For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* But be fair warned. Jesus goes on to say that if you reject me, you do have a judge. That judge, who will issue judgment on the last day, is "the word that I have spoken."

No judgment now, just an opportunity for salvation. Judgment later, according to what you decide to do with the words of Jesus. This should take you immediately back to our discussion of judicial hardening. Jesus did not come into the world to judge now... but his words, the words of scripture, will be our judge on the last day. Take note. Beware. There is power here. It might not happen now. You might think that you are

getting away with sin and rebellion against God. Billions of people on this planet believe that. But the word of God will judge every single one of them. And Jesus is the Word. That is how John opened his gospel, Chapter one verse one: *In the beginning was the Word and Word was with God and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as the of the only son from the Father.* We have been given extreme grace and mercy. Judgment is coming to this world, but it has not come yet. Now is the day of salvation. Tomorrow could be the day of judgment. Jesus speaks under the authority of God. All authority has been given him. Authority over life and death... authority to grant mercy and grace... authority to speak words of judgment, eternal judgment. Take note.

Heading for Easter

So, as an application, I have a question. Will it be paper or plastic? That is the question the clerk at the grocery store asked Susan last week, as the paramedics were rolling a dead man out of the store on a gurney. His wife, in confusion, was being consoled by one of the medics and the other members of the crew were still administering chest compressions as they wheeled him to the ambulance. He had likely had a heart attack and the paramedics had made every effort to revive him, yet it was apparent to Susan that he did not make it. As Susan expressed her heartbreak for the man's wife to the clerk, she looked at her with no expression and asked, "Paper or plastic?" She was oblivious to the eternal drama that was being

played out in the store, unthinking about her own eternal well-being, uncaring for the wife who had lost her husband. No emotion... flat line. But one day that store clerk will die. When she does, the words of Jesus will be her judge. The question to her will not be, "paper or plastic." The question will be "what did you do with the gospel of Christ?" It will not go well for her on that day if she does not come into the light.

There are hundreds of thousands of people just like this store clerk in this city. Unthinking. Unknowing. Uncaring. They are facing judgment and eternal suffering that they cannot comprehend. Many are judicially hardened. The message of Jesus has made them hard and blind. Others are simply uninformed when it comes to the gospel. How will they know if no one tells them and how will we tell them if no one is sent?

It is Palm Sunday. Today we celebrate Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem as redemptive history comes to its ultimate climax. This year, as we come to Easter, let's be thinking about the ones who need Jesus. Let's be thinking about the store clerks and all those who have no thought of the true meaning of Easter and the sacrifice of Jesus.

We cry out with the crowd on the road to Jerusalem, Hosanna! Give us salvation now!

Endnotes:

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 447