

Triumphal Entry

"Follow Me to the Cross" Series, March 22 & 23, 2025 (WOW2) | Mark 11:1-11

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

We don't always know what we're looking at.

Percival Lowell looked at Mars and thought he saw an advanced alien civilization.

In the late 1800s, an Italian astronomer turned a powerful telescope on the Red Planet and observed what appeared to be trenches crisscrossing the surface of Mars. On a map, he labeled them "canali," which got translated into English as "canals."

It was a time of "Mars fever" as astronomers studied our neighboring planet.

But the word "canal" stuck, and it suggested water and life and technology.

Looking for evidence of that life, Percival Lowell used his wealth to construct the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, to get a better look.

He mapped what he thought were canals.

And he popularized the idea that there was possibly advanced life on Mars.¹

Decades of research and science fiction flowed from looking at Mars the wrong way.

Sometimes our expectations keep us from seeing what we're looking at clearly.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, most people didn't know what they were looking at.

In our Scripture reading today, Jesus looks a lot like a king.

But not everyone saw Him as a king, and some people did not respond to the idea well at all.

What do you see when you look at Jesus?

Like the people in Jerusalem the day Jesus rode in triumphantly, we sometimes struggle to see Jesus clearly. Do you see Him as someone who has anything to offer you? Or is He just a great preacher who is possibly dangerous and probably a little deluded? Do you see someone who died a long time ago? Do you see a disappointment?

Can you look at Him as someone who rose again from the dead? Someone who lives and reigns, and can change your life, and give you a chance to live and thrive now and forever? Can you look at Him and see a king?

Mark is challenging us to see Him as He is, not just who we want Him to be.

And what are you willing to do about it?

That's always the question when it comes to Jesus. Mark challenges us not only to see Jesus the right way and to think about Him the right way, but to follow Him.

And when we see Jesus as king, it changes not only the way we think but the way we live.

¹ <https://www.popularmechanics.com/space/moon-mars/a17529/a-short-history-of-martian-canals-and-mars-fever/>

Jesus entered Jerusalem like a king.

In Mark 11:1, Jesus came to the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem ... at the Mount of Olives ...

Jesus is on the Mount of Olives, which is a very significant place.

Centuries earlier, the glory of God had departed Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. God dwelt among His people for centuries in the Temple in Jerusalem. But when God's people disobeyed Him, He took His glory away. The prophet Ezekiel saw God's glory leave the Temple and come to the Mount of Olives. In **Ezekiel 11:23** we read:

And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.

Later, **Zechariah 14:4** says:

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east ...

Zechariah saw that the King, will come back to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus' arrival on the Mount of Olives is the beginning of God's glory returning to His people.

Also, Jesus is clearly in charge here.

Jesus sends two disciples into a village with orders to retrieve a colt.

When they get to the village, the colt is right where Jesus said it would be.

They say exactly what He told them to say, and the people let the animal go.

Jesus clearly knew what would happen. He had a plan and was in charge. He is KING.

Then Jesus is given a kingly parade:

They brought Jesus a colt that had never been ridden. In the Old Testament, animals that have never been ridden or worked were considered particularly holy.

Zechariah told us to expect Messiah to ride a colt into Jerusalem. **Zechariah 9:9** says:

... Behold, your king is coming to you ... humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Disciples put their cloaks on the colt's back, Jesus sat on them, people spread their cloaks on the ground for the colt to walk on. It's like what happened when the Israelites crowned their kings. (See 2 Kings 9:13.)

It's clear. Jesus is king! But what does that mean to us?

Those of us who grew up in this country don't have kings, queens, and the like.

And we have mixed reactions to such things.

Some of us like it. Others of us don't like it. And many of us just don't care.

But Jesus being king is something we cannot ignore!

Jesus riding into Jerusalem like a king naturally stirs something inside of us.

We may resist the idea or be bored by the thought.

We may be inspired, eager to join the crowds in praising Him and celebrating. We may even feel strangely, inexplicably, and unavoidably drawn to the King. What does Jesus' riding into Jerusalem like a king stir in you? Why do you think that is?

Jerusalem welcomed Jesus with tension.

Mark 11:9-10 hints that the crowd got very involved:

And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

Those who went before probably shouted, "Hosanna!" while those who followed may have responded, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

They were quoting from and adapting Psalm 118. It was a psalm people sang or said as they came to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. This was a holiday tradition. But the fact that this was a holiday tradition means we need to pause here and ask what it meant, because getting caught up in a holiday cheer does not equal recognizing Jesus as king.

Clearly, people in Jerusalem responded to Jesus differently.

The disciples were celebrating the arrival of Jesus. By this time, they probably still hoped against hope that He would become the kind of king they expected who would make Israel great again.

The crowds were celebrating the arrival of a celebrity. Possibly a prophet. Maybe something more. They didn't know, but they were just excited. They did not see a king.

The Romans were watching for trouble. Had they seen a king in Jesus, they would have intervened swiftly and violently, but they did not. They kept watching.

The Jewish religious leaders saw a rival and a threat, not a king.

The disciples were close, but no one really understood what they were looking at in Jesus.

In fact, there was more tension in Jerusalem than at a dysfunctional family-Thanksgiving dinner.

You know what it's like when a dysfunctional family tries to gather for a holiday celebration.

People come together out of a sense of expectation, but there are simmering resentments, too.

Plus, there are bad memories, hurt feelings, lack of emotional intelligence, and even addictions.

Someone always lobs a conversational hand grenade into the crowd that leads to more conflict, more hurt feelings, and people wanting to get away from each other.

There was that same kind of tension in the crowd of people who were watching Jesus arrive in Jerusalem. They were all looking at the same Man, the same set of circumstances, and the same parade, but they all saw something different, and they could not agree on what.

They disagreed, but they couldn't just agree to disagree. Not about a question as consequential as, "Who is the True King?" Tension would turn into violence.

You see, Jesus upset people's expectations.

He wasn't like an ordinary king, and that upset some people. People expected kings like the Roman generals who fought battles, killed thousands of people, and brought trains of treasure home in

elaborate parades. Jesus wasn't like that, and that upset some of His own followers, and it disappointed the crowds.

He wasn't a simple preacher. The Romans could have accepted someone who entertained people but didn't challenge them, but Jesus wasn't like that.

He wasn't a "company man," and that upset the Jewish religious leaders who wanted someone to uphold and defend their traditions as the way to God's favor. Jesus didn't do that.

Jesus didn't fit ANYONE's expectations, so EVERYONE had a difficult time accepting Him.

Can we see Jesus for who He truly is?

Will we receive the King?

Jesus upsets our expectations of a king.

He comes into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a horse.

He comes in to waving tree branches and spreading cloaks, not trumpets and pageantry.

He saves His people by dying in their place and rises from the dead, having defeated our biggest enemies.

He may be unexpected, but He shows us what a True King does and who the True King is.

But because He sometimes defies our expectations, it can make Him difficult to follow.

Jesus upset the expectations of a friend of mine who started reading the Bible didn't like it.

He wanted to dig into Jesus' teachings, so I suggested the Sermon on the Mount.

When we got together to talk about it, I was glad he had read it multiple times.

But he said that it made him angry.

He liked the things like being salt and light in the world; but he didn't like it when Jesus said to forgive your enemies, not to be angry, and to avoid lust.

What Jesus taught wasn't what he expected or what he wanted. And it was tough for him. He didn't want to do those things or be that kind of person or follow that kind of God. Jesus completely defied his expectations about God and life.

What expectations of yours has Jesus upset?

Did you expect that Jesus would leave you alone and let you live your life as you wanted?

Did you think that God would show up when you needed, do what you wanted, and make sure that your life turns out the way that you wanted?

Did you expect God to make the world as it is into the world as it should be in your lifetimes?

I imagine that God has significantly upset your expectations of Him and of life.

The same thing happens to me. Jesus upset my expectations when my friend Dale died.

Dale and I served as pastors together over twenty years ago.

I was a new pastor, and he was ten years older than I was and became a mentor and friend.

Dale had been a football player and wrestler in high school, and he was still built like it.

Dale went on to become the pastor of a large church in North Carolina and kept mentoring young pastors and starting churches.

In 2021, Dale was just past sixty years old and still almost in football shape. Then he got COVID. He got very sick and wound up in the hospital. Eventually, he died.

I was devastated. Dale was a good friend, but it was something more.

I spent hours by the fire pit in my backyard asking God why it hurt so much. I asked God why He would let Dale die when his family still needed him so much. I asked God how he could let someone like Dale die when the Kingdom of God still needed him so much.

I found myself saying to God, "I thought we had a deal!"

That's when it hit me. I thought I had a deal with God. If I thought that if my family needed me and if I worked for the Kingdom of God, if I made myself "indispensable," then he would protect...me. Not Dale. Me. Obviously God never made that deal with me.

I got to see myself more clearly. I will never be indispensable.

And I got to see God more clearly. He is King. This is His Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God starts small, not big. I wanted it to be big enough that no one I care about would ever get hurt or die again.

The Kingdom of God is still somewhat not yet, and I want it to be now. All of it now.

There is a day coming when death will be no more, but it is not yet.

There is a day coming when there will be no more mourning or crying or pain, but it's not yet.

But Jesus is still in charge! His is more in charge than I thought! And still riding into Jerusalem!

God upset my expectations of Him, and it hurt, but it was good.

Will we accept Jesus as He is, as King?

It's not easy to see Jesus as He truly is.

We've got so many preconceived notions, so many demands, and so many expectations.

But when we see Him as He truly is, He is King. His own kind of king. The True King.

And when we see Him as King, then we have a decision to make: Can we accept Him?

I know that it would be great to come to Jesus on our own terms. It would be great to get the Jesus we want and to be allowed to be who we want. But that's not who Jesus is or how we come to Jesus.

And I know that once we realize that Jesus is His own person and that He is not going to fit into our boxes or be Who we want and expect Him to be, then we are tempted to walk away. But that doesn't work either, because He gives us new life and eternal life, and we can't get that anywhere else, and that is exactly what we need.

So, what are you going to do today?

I'm showing you Jesus—to the best of my ability I am showing you Jesus as He truly is.

And Jesus is calling you to Himself, to come and follow Him.

Will you receive the King and follow Him?

If you do, then as disciples of Jesus, there is one more thing for us to do...

Let's proclaim the King.

Jesus upset the expectations of the people of Jerusalem when He arrived.

Imagine that all of those groups in Jerusalem were newspaper reporters covering Jesus' arrival.

Imagine the headlines they would write.

The Jewish religious leaders might write, "Heretic Storms Holy City".

The Romans might start, "Secret Police Watch Possible Insurrectionist".

The crowds might say, "Pilgrim Preacher Parades Past People".

The disciples would probably come close to the truth, "Here Comes the King!"

As disciples of Jesus who have witnessed the cross and Resurrection, we can do better.

We can diligently proclaim the Good News about Jesus, who upsets our expectations.

With Jesus' disciples and the crowds of Jerusalem that day, we are still shouting, "Hosanna!" That means, "Save us!" Jesus is the only One who saves.

We are still crying out, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." There is hope for new life and eternal life in Jesus.

We proclaim the coming Kingdom of God, and we praise God because of it.

Jesus may not look like what people expect, but it is our job not only to follow Him ourselves but to invite others to do so as well.

We are called to diligently proclaim the Gospel around the world—to people who do not know Him, may not recognize Him at first, and may even (at times) fight back because Jesus is not who they are expecting. But we keep proclaiming, and we keep going with the Good News.

God is out there even now, calling people to Himself, drawing people to Him, and making Himself known in surprising—even shocking—kinds of ways.

And He invites us to join Him. He invites YOU to join Him.

I met a man whose life was changed because someone helped him to see Jesus differently.

He is from North Africa, and as a young man he left his family behind to go to the Arabian Peninsula for work because work there was plentiful, and the pay was better than at home.

But his employers didn't like immigrants. They refuse to acknowledge guest workers.

So, this man who came from a very warm culture was alone—no one to eat with, no friends.

The only people who would eat with him and who made room for him were Christians.

For nearly two decades, Christians ate with him, showed him God's love, and told him about Jesus.

They diligently proclaimed Jesus to a Muslim man and upset his expectations.

After nearly two decades of sending money home to support his family, he came home.

He found a church on social media, he connected with the church, accepted Jesus, and became part of a church. I am so glad someone upset his expectations of Jesus!

But after two years at home, he had run out of money and was going back to work on the Arabian Peninsula. That's when I met him, days before he was to go back to work.

Here I am with Pastor Asher praying for him. He asked us to pray that when he went back to work, he could find a church to connect with. And he is praying that the government will not find out that he is now a Christian because if the government of the country where he is working finds out that a Muslim converted to Christianity, they will execute him. This is a very brave man.

We can be like that man! We can show that same kind of bravery and resolve where we are.

We can pray that the Gospel will advance around the world. We can pray that lost people will meet Jesus and that our missionaries will faithfully and diligently proclaim the Gospel. But let's pray fervently and constantly, not passively or occasionally.

We can give so that the Gospel will advance among the unreached people of the world, but let's give sacrificially, like someone's life and eternity depend on it.

We can go ourselves to help proclaim the Gospel, and there are short-term ways still available for us to go.

We can go ourselves, and it's time to think about going for the long-term. God may be giving you the unexpected call to go for years or for a lifetime to another culture to proclaim the Gospel. There are certainly some people here today that God is speaking to!

And we can go ourselves to people from around the world who have moved right here to the Farmington Valley. God has brought the world to our back yard!

And we can all go to the people around us who think they have Jesus all figured out. They have written the headline that fits Jesus into a neat, little box. But they still don't know the real Jesus, the True King. And they are not ready to welcome Him into their lives. We can go and tell them that Jesus IS King and that He has changed our lives. We can all do that.

What can you do to proclaim the arrival of our unexpected King?

Grab a palm branch.

Set your coat on the road.

Don't worry what the religious leaders, the soldiers, or the crowds think.

Get ready to sing, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"