

# “Only A Beginning”

## Palm Sunday

### *Zechariah 9:9-12*

**“Rejoice, greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he . . . Zechariah 9:9**

<sup>1</sup>Of the many attempts to portray the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus on screens, the one I have appreciated the most is the TV Mini-Series *Jesus of Nazareth*, written and directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Of course a television or movie portrayal of Jesus’ life and work should never replace the Biblical Gospels, but it can give us good commentary. It can serve as a helpful summary or supplement.

There is a scene toward the end of the show when a fictional character, a scribe named Zerra, introduced for dramatic purposes, has done all within his power to make certain that corpse of the executed Jesus of Nazareth remains in the tomb where it belongs. He has heard the rumors of resurrection. He rushes to the tomb and is shocked to find the stone rolled away. He is disturbed to find the tomb empty. “Now it begins,” he laments. “It all begins.”

Yet, as we consider our Old Testament reading from the prophet Zechariah on this Palm Sunday, we conclude that the scribe Zerra’s pronouncement at the empty tomb of Jesus comes about five hundred years too late. According to Zechariah, it had already begun! The Biblical Gospels quote this passage from the prophet Zechariah when Jesus enters into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to hail his coming arrival.

Yet, in another sense, this triumphal entry was only a beginning, as we are reminded when we read this passage and reflect on it annually during the season of Advent, the beginning of the Church Year calendar. We begin our observance and remembrance of the life and work of Jesus all over again every November at the beginning of Advent. And the story of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the words of Zechariah are heard all over again.

Only a beginning. It doesn’t all begin at the empty tomb as the scribe, Zerra, claims. To trace the beginning we have to go back. We have to go back to the triumphal entry, to a birth and an incarnation, and back further still to a promise. A promise that is foretold and forth-told through God’s prophet, Zechariah.

But how do we relate to a promise and a people so long ago? How can a message for them be meaningful for us? Five hundred years before the birth of Jesus is a bit of a fuzzy and hazy time to think

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is adapted from a sermon on Zechariah 9:9-12 by Dr. Jeff Oschwald of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and was first preached in the chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus on the campus of the Seminary.

about. Zechariah says to his hearers, “today I declare that I will restore to you double” (Zech 9:12). Isn’t that day and time somewhat irretrievable?

When we consider the situation of Zechariah’s hearers and their struggles we see a people that suffered from both political and theological disappointment and dissolution. Expectations had not materialized. Foreign powers dominated. There was economic uncertainty. And the people of God that had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon with the task of building a new temple and a new city were plagued with apathy. So what does any of that have to do with us, *today*?

It would be another five hundred years or so after Zechariah’s time before the streets of Jerusalem would be covered with sweet hosannas and palm branches. Even then the daughter of Jerusalem, as Zechariah refers to God’s people Israel, would not really know the Jesus she is welcoming. Zechariah’s hearers would long remain imprisoned in their hope, waiting for their king. And when he arrives it seems that he is not even the one who many of them were hoping for anyway.

He was lowly. The spectacle of his arrival was not that of a war hero. But despite all of that Jerusalem, Zion, and all God’s people are commanded to rejoice *now* because it is all beginning with a promise. And with our God a promise is as certain as fulfillment.

Here on Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, on the cusp of the culmination of our Lenten journey to the cross and the empty tomb, it seems odd to reflect on these words from Zechariah. But by spending some time with this prophet and his words, and by recalling the situation and circumstances of his hearers, we see how small our field of vision is sometimes. When we are drawn back far enough to see where the story of the king and his triumphal entry begins, we have the perspective to see where it ends. Often we can refer to the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection as the climax of the Bible’s story, the world’s story, and our story. We certainly take the “it is finished” of Jesus on the cross with complete seriousness.

But Palm Sunday, the cross, and the empty tomb are only a beginning. Zechariah points us to the fact that Palm Sunday, the cross, and the empty tomb as “only a beginning” in three ways. He tells us that the promised one who arrives humble and mounted on a donkey is also the saved one. He is the righteous one. And he is the one who speaks peace.

In Jesus we see the one who does the fathers will. He drinks the cup the father gives him. He is the one abandoned on the cross. He is the one who traveled to Hell for us. But he was not fully abandoned in the tomb. He is saved. He is risen. God raised him from the dead. When we behold and believe in this King who is the saved we come to understand in a greater way what it means to be saved. It means not being abandoned. It means having life—true, eternal life.

When we behold and believe in this King who is saved we also come to see what it means that he is righteous. And we come to see what it means that he speaks peace. In this King who comes to us, and in him alone, can we have true salvation, true righteousness, and true peace. It flows from his side on

Calvary. It is spilled into and onto the pages of Holy Scripture. It is poured into a baptismal font. It covers the altar where it is found in bread and wine.

Zechariah is quoted in the gospels as referring to Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday prior to his crucifixion and resurrection (Mt 21:5; Jn 12:15). There the Servant King, the true Son of David who is "gentle and lowly of heart" (Mt 11:29), embarks on his procession to the cross. Although he is righteous, he is condemned as a criminal in order to bear sinful humanity's unrighteousness and to impart to us his righteousness. He breaks the oppression of sin and Satan, and speaks peace to us. By his "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28), he sets us free from the waterless pit of Hell and eternal separation from God. His reign is a universal and eternal one, and we are secure in the stronghold of his grace. Behold your king has come! Behold your king comes! Behold your king will come! Righteous and having salvation! And it is only a beginning. Amen.