

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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Palm Sunday
April 9, 2006
Zechariah 9:9-12

"Behold! Your King!"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

If you want to draw the attention of someone to an important thing, what do you say? Something like: "Look!" "See this!" In the process the word "see" has entered into the common usage of our language as an emphatic word which in the process has often lost its real power. "See", I wanted to tell you this. In older English, the word "Behold" served this purpose. Behold! Even as I say it, it might receive more attention than the word see, but we very rarely use it anymore except possibly for those who still hear it in church. The word or its original source words occurs many times in the Scriptures. There are 519 occurrences of the Hebrew word, "hinneh" in the Old Testament and 200 occurrences of the Greek word "idou" in the New Testament. In both languages, it acts like an exclamation point at the beginning of a sentence to draw attention to what is to follow. And for that purpose, "behold" is admirably well suited. Behold also shows up in some hymns. "Behold a Branch is Growing" is sung at Advent time. But even in the more modern translations of the Bible the word "behold" has given way to the more prosaic "see". Yet, in the theme for this morning, I have purposely chosen to use the word behold--Behold! Your King! It is a fitting theme, and a proper use of the word as we consider the three Scripture lessons for this morning as we stand at the threshold of another Holy Week and prepare to journey with our Lord Jesus Christ not just into Jerusalem, but to the cross of Calvary.

I. The King in Prophecy

In the Old Testament lesson for this day, the prophet Zechariah uses the word "hinneh" or behold most effectively. His words are words of joy to a people that have gone through much trouble and distress. He calls upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem (the daughter of Zion) to rejoice and shout. And why? Behold, your king comes to you! They are to look forward with great expectation to the arrival of their king. And as the prophecy describes this king we see that it is no ordinary king whose image is painted here in the words of the prophet. For this king is righteous and has salvation. Of what earthly king could it be said that of himself he is righteous? And of what earthly king could it be said that he brings salvation, or is salvation in himself. Most important of all, this king does not arrive in great splendor upon a mighty steed, a stallion, a war horse. No, he comes gently, humble, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. It would be a scene to make the great and powerful leaders of the world laugh in derision. This is your king, who arrives in such humility! What can he possibly do for you.

But the prophecy is clear on that fact as well. The remaining verses of the Old Testament lesson point out that the king will proclaim peace to the nations and his rule will extend to

the ends of the earth. The chariots of war, the horses of war, the weapons of war will all be taken away. This humble king will have a greater effect upon the world than any other king ever had or ever will. Behold! Your King!

II. The King in Fulfillment

And now we go forward 500 years to behold the king in fulfillment. I do not think that the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, or the wayfarers along the road from Bethany and Bethphage down the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem were aware that they would be part of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah. But there was One who was aware. And this is a point that I must admit I had not really fully considered in all the times that I have looked at the Palm Sunday texts until I was studying the text this year. In all the Gospels accounts of the travels of Jesus, his going from one place to another, it is never stated that he used any other means than walking. Of course, he used a boat on occasion on the Sea of Galilee. But there is never a mention of Jesus riding upon any beast of burden except for this one time.

But now it is Jesus who makes sure this takes place. He sent two disciples saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" (Mark 11:2-3) Not just any donkey either, but a colt and its mother. The Lord has need of them. They were not needed so that the Lord could comfortably ride into Jerusalem. They were certainly not needed because he was unable to walk into the city. Indeed on the next days he would walk into the city on several occasions. But the Lord needed them so that his true and everlasting word might find its perfect fulfillment. For St. Matthew in the Gospel states that "this took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet" immediately after the words about Jesus sending the disciples to fetch the donkey and her colt. It would be the first of many times in the coming week that our Lord would fulfill the words of old, for God's word is the truth.

So it is that on that Palm Sunday our Lord Jesus Christ entered into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, humbly, gently, riding on a donkey. And the crowd in its excitement greets their king by speaking other words of Scripture, other prophecies thus finding their fulfillment: : "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!" (Mark 11:9-10) Hosanna! they cried. Lord, save us. And who better to save than the king who is righteous and has salvation as the prophecy declared. And truly blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, as the ancient psalm, sung by the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem found its perfect fulfillment on this day as the Lord himself entered into his city, his Zion.

III. The King Humbled and Glorified

Yet I doubt if all those present really knew what was about to take place. It is certain Jesus

own disciples did not comprehend it. They greeted their king with joy yet did not know of the pain, sorrow, and suffering that lay just ahead. Only Jesus himself knew. He did not ride into Jerusalem to wear a crown of gold, but rather to wear a crown of throne. He did not come to claim a throne but to be nailed to a cross. It was a sorrow that he himself would pray that his Father if at all possible would take from him according to his will. For the journey has just begun.

In the past years, the emphasis of this Sunday in the church year has shifted somewhat from Palm Sunday to the Sunday of the Passion. I fear part of that comes from the fact that more and more people are failing to gather for worship during the solemn services of Holy Week especially on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and so it was decided to emphasize the Passion of our Lord on this Sunday the week before Easter so that at least those who come to church on Sunday will hear the passion account. We this year for the first time in many years have chosen to stick with the Palm Sunday message, but will include the reading of the Passion according to St. Matthew in our Tenebrae Service on Wednesday evening as a fitting introduction to the holy days of Passion Week. This day then is really just the start of the journey which our Lord must take.

But the Epistle for this morning is a useful reminder of that journey. The beautiful words of St. Paul tell us again of the humility and the exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ. We remember indeed that he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross. That was for us, for our salvation, for our redemption and glory. And then St. Paul also tells us of his glory, that God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every name. And there too we see our theme most eloquently portrayed: Behold! Your King! For when the Lord returns in glory He will not come riding humbly upon a donkey's colt. He will come in the clouds of heaven and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord either in despair at having acknowledged it too late, or in exultation as the complete fulfillment of our salvation draws nigh.

In the coming days, may we all behold our King. That is my prayer for the members of Mount Olive (and those who listen today to our radio broadcast) that we may find these coming days to be days of spiritual renewal and growth as we again contemplate and hear the accounts of the passion of our Lord. For in one week, we will gather here again, to celebrate the victory! Behold, your King! Behold, indeed!

At the conclusion of this service we will sing a hymn which captures very nicely these thoughts. May it be our closing prayer:

And yet he comes, the children cheer,
With palms His path is strown.
With every step the cross draws near--
The King of glory's throne,
Astride a colt He passes by
As loud hosannas ring,

Or else the very stones would cry:
"Behold, behold your King!"

Now He who bore for mortals sake
The cross and all its pains
And chose a servant's form to take,
The King of glory reigns.
Hosanna to the Savior's name
Till heaven's rafters ring,
And all the ransomed host proclaim
"Behold, behold your King!"

In Jesus' Name. Amen.