



good shepherd  
presbyterian church

## **King?**

John 18-19

Sermon by: Robert Austell  
Palm Sunday – March 28, 2021

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Last week we talked about the failures of Judas and Peter, but also about how God offers love and mercy to us in Christ, even in our own failures. I alluded to the strange dynamic that Jesus was both considered a failure and victorious during the events of his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. And all of that can be gathered up into the title of ‘King’ - which was simultaneously used to sentence him to death, mock him, and fulfil the prophecies and promises of God about the Messiah. And while all of that makes for an intriguing Sunday school lesson, it raises the practical question for each of us: “Who do you say he is?”

### **Hosannas**

In one sense, the question of the Messiah started long before the events of this Holy Week. God made covenants and promises to Abraham and his children and extended those covenant promises with King David. God spoke through the Old Testament prophets of fulfilling these promises through a Messiah, an anointed King in the line of David, but also a suffering servant in the messages of Isaiah.

All this came to a head on Palm Sunday when Jesus came into Jerusalem. Crowds gathered, hailing him as the Messiah-King, shouting the words from Psalm 118: “Hosanna... save us now! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” They named him... “even the King of Israel.” (John 12:13) And it was this same declaration of the crowds that pushed the religious leaders to work for his arrest and execution. They used that notion, “King of the Jews” to convince the Roman governor, Pilate, to try him and sentence him.

“Hosanna” is an interesting word. Growing up I always thought it was similar to “Hallelujah!” - a word of praise and celebration. But it is a cry for help. It

literally translates as “Save us now!” like we might shout “Help me!” And the specific context is Psalm 118, which you heard part of in the Call to Worship. The salvation it appeals to is specifically that of God’s anointed, the Messiah, the one who would come in the name of the Lord with blessing and shalom. So it is a targeted “Help me!” not just shouted into the wind, but to the Lord and here, to the Messiah.

In fact, this is a total aside, but it occurs to me that it could be part of a comprehensive very short prayer, or could help you organize your prayers: Hosanna, Hallelujah, Amen!

*Hosanna* - Lord, you see me; help me; hear my prayers; save me.

*Hallelujah* - Praise you, Lord; I love and worship you, offering myself to you.

*Amen* - So be it; your will be done!

Things turn quickly after that Hosanna Sunday, that Palm Sunday. While Jesus is gathering with his disciples to wash their feet, have the Last Supper, and share all the teaching we’ve been looking at for the past several weeks, the religious leaders were conspiring against him. And late Thursday night, with Judas’ betrayal, Jesus is arrested and taken to the Roman Governor, Pilate, to stand trial.

## **Trial**

The trial is interesting, to say the least. The religious leaders are the group who really want to get Jesus, but they lack the authority to execute him. So they bring him with some weak arguments like, “We wouldn’t have brought him to you if he weren’t doing evil thing.” (John 18:30) Pilate questions him, even specifically asking if he is “King of the Jews.” If you read all the story you really pick up on a lot of the intrigue and dynamics at play. For example, Jesus asks if Pilate is asking on his own initiative or is being prompted by others. At any rate, Jesus goes on to answer that his kingdom is not of this world. (vv.36-37) He does go on to admit to being a king (v.37), but his purpose in the world is to testify to truth. (v.37) Pilate famously says, “What is truth?” but finally finds no guilt in him. (v.38)

Perhaps Pilate thought he would solve the issue by offering to free one prisoner; he offered a choice between Jesus and a robber named Barabbas. But they chose to free Barabbas. From there Pilate sends him to be beaten, which I’ll speak to in a moment. Perhaps Pilate thought THIS would satisfy the

religious leaders, but it did not. We read that Pilate sought to release Jesus (19:12), but the religious leaders pressed that Jesus presented a threat to Caesar, even suggesting to Pilate that he might be implicated: “If you release this man [Jesus], you are no friend of Caesar.” (19:12) And so after several more questions and the chief priests pressing the claim, “We have no king but Caesar,” Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified. (19:15-16)

## Mocked and Beaten

Jesus is not just betrayed, arrested, and handed over to death; he suffers greatly along the way. The whipping by Roman guards was gruesome, as historical records attest. I don't know if you remember the pushback to Mel Gibson's movie some 20 years ago, but it was over graphically showing this scene. And yet from everything I read and studied, it was historically accurate. New Testament writers (1 Peter 2:24) connect it to Old Testament scriptures; listen to Isaiah 53:4-5:

*<sup>4</sup> Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.  
<sup>5</sup> But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.*

They understood that Jesus' suffering was part of the salvation/rescue rendered to us, not just his final death on the cross.

The soldiers struck him in the face and dressed him up as a mock-king, including the crown of thorns cutting into his head. Later Pilate would put a notice on the cross to read “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” in three different languages. (John 19:19) The chief priests didn't like this; they wanted it to say “he said he was King of the Jews.” (v.21) But Pilate said, “What I have written, I have written.” (v.22) Whether intentionally or not, Pilate ended up doing his own testifying to the truth, so maybe he learned something about truth after all. We read that “many Jews read this inscription” because it was in a public place near the city. (v.20)

## Who Do You Say He Is?

As I said earlier, all this makes for a fascinating study, but it's easy for it to not get personal, to miss application to our lives. But I think it raises the very personal and applicable question: Who do you say Jesus is? It's easy to answer as church people when we've heard the answer before: he's the Son of God, Lord and Savior. But practically, day in and day out, I wonder if we can be honest and find ourselves in the story.

Is Jesus a kind of super-hero after our own making, there to make life better for us in the ways we envision it? We craft him more in our image than we in his. I think about this on Palm Sunday.

Related to that, do we ever find Jesus an annoyance, and irritation, saying and doing things that run counter to our way of life, making us uncomfortable as 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians? He did hang out with unsavory people, teach and preach about the poor and outcast, and challenge the religious establishment. I think about this when I see the role the religious folks had in this story.

Is Jesus an embarrassment to us outside these walls, leading us to forms of denial and keeping our faith private. I think about this when I hear Peter's denials. And I think about how money and material comfort sometimes become more of a priority than Jesus when I come to the story of Judas.

Jesus said he came to testify to the truth - about God, about us. Do you water down that truth or make it relative like Pilate did when face to face with Jesus?

Jesus famously asked his disciples one time, "Who do you say I am?" And they gave various other answers: teacher or prophet. Peter got that one right, "You are the Messiah/Christ, Son of the Living God." He did not fail; we just fail to see and believe and follow sometimes. Jesus shows us who he is in these accounts of the trial and then the crucifixion. He is the one who tells the truth, announces the Kingdom of God, suffers like us, and ultimately dies for us. He IS the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, the Savior of the world. He is King, indeed! Amen.