

9 April 2006  
Palmarum

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“The Bridegroom *par excellence!*”

Text: Zechariah 9:9-10; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are, for the most part, used to hearing the Palm Sunday story. We hear it every year. Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the colt or donkey, the palm branches being waived and the garments strewn on the road, the shouts of *Hosanna*. But what is the significance of this scene? Why did Jesus come in this way? When Zechariah wrote this prophecy hundreds of years before Jesus was born, to a people discouraged and confused, how did they hear it? What did it mean for them?

Well interestingly, the language and style Zechariah uses to describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is that of a royal wedding. He uses the language of betrothal. God's people, Israel, is the bride, and the Lord, the God of Israel, is the groom who is coming in regal procession to meet His bride. All the preparations have been made, everything is now ready, and the groom is coming! He is met by the customary shouts and rejoicing, for this is a festive time, a time of great joy and expectation! Zechariah also speaks of the wedding gift that the Lord is bringing to His bride – the gift of peace. And so to a group of folks who had just returned from exile to a city populated by foreigners and a Temple that had been flattened, this picture painted by Zechariah's words is a wonderful and encouraging one indeed.

But the scene painted by Zechariah is also a bit unusual, for the King, the bridegroom, is riding on a donkey, a young colt – not the usual mode of transport for a king! But it is appropriate, for as we are soon to find out, the gift of peace this King comes to bring His bride *is the gift of Himself*. He indeed is **“righteous and having salvation,”** but it is a salvation that would not come in a show of power and might, but in the humility and shame and sacrifice of Himself on the cross. That by His death His bride might live. That by His blood His bride might be cleansed. That by His body His bride might be fed. And so He comes – not just as any bridegroom! – but as the groom *par excellence* – the husband who lays down His life for His bride. Who lays down His life **for us**.

And that is what we again come face-to-face with this week, this Holy Week. The

greatness of our King, who did not consider His greatness something to be grasped and kept for Himself, but lowered Himself down to us, to us sinners, to us unfaithful brides, to die for us. We'll hear the story again today. But as we do, it is also with the end of the story in mind. That our King, our royal bridegroom, who came to lay down His life for our peace and forgiveness, would also then take His life back up again in His resurrection. So that when He comes again for His bride, she – we! – now cleansed by His blood and pure, will be ready for Him! And He will take us to His home, His Heavenly home, to celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which will have no end. That feast we anticipate now, in Holy Communion, and so we too sing the betrothal song sang that day in Jerusalem: ***“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”*** We sing it because He is here for us, ***righteous and having salvation***, giving us in the gift of His body and blood, His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And we sing it because we know He is coming again, and we await in eager joy and expectation for that day, just as those who greeted Him in Jerusalem.

So as you hear the story again now, the story of our Lord's Passion, think on these things. **That what you are about to hear is a love story.** That this is not only the story of your Saviour and your salvation – it is the story of your bridegroom, coming for His bride. Coming, because it is His great love that brought Him here, to cleanse you and lay down His life for you, giving *everything*, that you might live.

Ponder that now, beloved. Ponder that.

## **Part II – The Reading of the Passion: Mark 14**

Modern, popular self-help gurus have a new kind of mantra of advice for folks who are having marriage problems. They simply ask, *“Are you better off with him, or without him?”* And how you answer that question should determine what you should do. Stay, or go. It's all about what's in it for me. It's all about getting. It's all selfishness of the highest degree – that whatever I do, I do for me.

What a contrast our bridegroom, who – without thinking about it very much – we would have to say *is better off without us!* For what have we just heard? What kind of bride has He come to? There are hypocritical objections when something nice is done for Him. Betrayal. Denial. Abandonment. Sleeping. Fear. Running away and leaving Him alone. False testimony. Lying. Hatred. Disdain. . . . And what about us? What kind of brides are we? Beautiful, or ugly as sin? Faithful or unfaithful? You know the answer. We don't have to think about it very much. Our love for our bridegroom has failed too.

And yet our bridegroom does not abandon us. Consider His great love. He does not cut us loose, or cut Himself loose from us! No, in fact, He lets Himself be bound *for* us, that He might be bound *to* us. *His* vows are perfect, as is His love. And so even though His bride be unlovable, He will not stop His relentless march to the cross for her. He will not resist. He will not fight. He will not stop loving with a love that we cannot fathom.

The world considers this foolishness. Why would God do so much for so little? But when we think this way, we are using a measuring stick of our own making, and so God's love doesn't fit. . . . But today, this week, realize that that's a good thing! For God's love is a love beyond our measuring. A love that is not about getting, but about giving – from giving of Himself in the creation in the beginning, to giving Himself for our redemption on the cross, to giving of Himself here for us to eat and to drink. Who could not be amazed at this? Who could believe it?

You do. You believe it. For your bridegroom, who has given everything for you, and given you everything, has given you the faith to believe it as well. That forgiven all your sins, washed clean and restored, you be the bride He has always seen you to be. And we see Him not as a bridegroom we can live with, but as One that we cannot live without.

### **Part III – The Reading of the Passion: Mark 15**

It is interesting to note what others said to, or about, Jesus on the cross.

***“He saved others; he cannot save himself.”*** Cannot, or *will* not?

***“Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.”*** No, Jesus said: Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed. (Jn 20:29) For seeing is not believing; believing is seeing.

***“You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross.”*** Yet how can He rebuild the Temple of His body if it be not first destroyed?

***“Truly this man was the Son of God.”*** It takes a Roman Centurion to utter these words. And he is the closest to the truth. Closest, for he is not *quite* right. For this man not *was*, but *is*, the Son of God. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Death cannot stop it. Death cannot stop Him. He enters death to defeat death. He dies so that He might rise. He becomes sin in order to atone for sin, and provide His bride forgiveness. No, His work did not stop in death. *God is never past tense!* He always is.

And He is always working for us – even in His death and His rest in the grave.

*Ordinarily*, death breaks the marriage covenant. “*Til death do us part*” we promise in our vows. But again, not with our bridegroom! He dies and rises so that we might be His forever – bride and groom, Church and Saviour, forever together in His kingdom which has no end. For as His love is eternal, so He wills that we live in that love eternally. And so His death means that our death is simply the gate to that life. (Ps 118)

And so He has come for His bride – humble and having salvation. Giving Himself. And nothing in Heaven or on earth or under the earth will stop it. His love wouldn't have it any other way. The events of Holy Week are not tragic miscarriages of justice. They are not a series of unfortunate events. They are not events spinning out of control. **They are a love story.** A story of love shown to the loveless that we might lovely be. (LW #91) The story of our bridegroom, who will stop at nothing, for His bride.

And as Zechariah would say: Ponder that, O beloved. Ponder that.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.