

INTRODUCTION: THE ERRORS OF MISPLACED HOPE OR DESPAIR

When we see the political climate in this election season (candidates...lack of integrity...deception and cover-ups...abuse of finances...evidence of disgusting and abusive behavior towards women and others...policies and laws that are profoundly dishonoring to God...along with foreign threats such as Russia and Iran, and, of course, ISIS), **it's easy to fall into one of two different reactions: Misplaced hope, or despair.** If we like a candidate and think they can fix things, we might place too much hope in them if they win; if we don't like a candidate and worry that they'll destroy our country, we might despair if THEY win.

The big question: Where is our ultimate hope located? In a particular candidate? In the future of America? In our ability to move to another country if needed?

Where our hope is located also determines what can make us despair—the natural response if the source of our ultimate hope fails us.

Both candidates in this election have tapped into people's hopes, and both have demonstrated profound failings that could easily lead us to despair.

That's not actually too different from the political climate in about 30 A.D. in Jerusalem.

As a background to the text, more and more people have heard of Jesus' miracles and teaching, and now He's heading to Jerusalem—the central city of the Jewish world...

MARK 11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.' " ⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" ¹⁰ "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went

into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. (Mark 11:1-11, NIV)

FRAME WITH ELECTION SEASON: CANDIDATES' PROMISES AND OUR HOPE OR DESPAIR

This sermon is actually **adapted from one by a colleague and good friend of mine (A.J. Gretz), who preached it on Palm Sunday.** But in election season it also seems especially appropriate.

This election season, **candidates have tapped into a sense of frustration with the status quo and the fear on both sides of the aisle.** Many of the candidates want us to believe that we are not where we are supposed to be, but that they are the ones who can get us there.

They promise to make America Great Again or to fight for us—saying that we're stronger together. They want us to believe in their vision for the country.

And when we see political figures with big promises, the temptation we can have is to subtly place our ultimate hope in them ("He/she will finally fix things!"), or if we're worried about their character and policies, to fall into despair. The problem with both approaches is that it centers our hope in another human—as if they can either save us or destroy us.

We'll come back to this as we look at Mark 11, and meet the only One who actually save us—though His plan is often very different from our initial expectations. He alone keeps us from misplaced hope and from despair.

As a side note: **The U.S. is NOT the "city on a hill" that Jesus refers to in Matthew 5;** the city on a hill is made up of all who belong to Jesus. Although it is true that our country's foundation was strongly affected by a Judeo-Christian Biblical worldview (and that is something to treasure!), we need to know that God's kingdom is NOT the United States of America. His kingdom is the Christian Church throughout time and across the world! And that means that the future of the U.S. does not determine the future of God's kingdom; even if the U.S. were at some point in history to lose its place in the world, God's kingdom under Christ will persist. And so we need to remember that we are **FIRST** citizens of heaven...our political citizenship is after/subservient to our eternal citizenship.

THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN ISRAEL

As a background to this passage, what was the political climate in Israel? Not actually too different from our own.

Israel as a nation had experienced a tremendous amount of change, and most of it was not positive. Once, it was a great nation. During David and Solomon's reign, Israel experienced tremendous success, and became a major power in the ancient near east.

But after Solomon, the nation of Israel collapsed into civil war. And slowly over time, the people of God wandered into idolatry, and the nation suffered. Eventually they were exiled for some time. And even after they came back, things were never quite the same.

At the time of Jesus' ministry, **Israel is no longer its own country.** They are subject to the Romans, who occupy the land that God gave to His people. Definitely not what the Israelites would hope for.

JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM

And Mark 11 is taking place at the beginning of what's called the Passover Festival in Jerusalem. Passover was a remembrance of the story from Exodus, when God rescued His people from slavery and brought them out of Egypt.

Remembering the Exodus would naturally bring up a lot of strong feelings of patriotism and nationalism for the people of Israel—like celebrating the 4th of July, or hearing the National Anthem. This was one of the most important and defining moments for God's people: It marked the beginning of their life as a nation—set apart to be in relationship with God.

So it's interesting that **Jesus times his entrance into Jerusalem at the beginning of this festival.** Many people would come from all over Israel to participate in the Passover. And Jesus makes His arrival before this huge crowd.

In some ways, the Triumphal Entry feels a little bit like a campaign rally. Some Jews had strong political expectations for the Messiah. They may have hoped for a Messiah who would set Himself up as a rival to Caesar, to use force to overcome the Romans and end the occupation, so that the Kingdom of Israel can be restored to its former glory under David. "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David."

The crowd is not scolded here, and on one level they have it right: They are praising God, in contrast to some of the religious leaders. But it's possible that some of the Jews may still be looking for a leader who will solve their problems, fight for them, bring them together, and make them great again.

And they shout "Hosanna!" which is a basic explanation of praise originally meaning, "Save, I pray!"

There had been times in the past when the Israelites had put their hope in others to rescue them, and been deeply disappointed. Leaders had arisen and sought to cast off Roman rule, but the rebellions had been put down in a bloody fashion. And seeing power of Rome and Caesar crushing the ones in whom they had put their hope, the Israelites could have been tempted to despair. But NOW they are rallying around the One who actually IS the true King and Savior.

This is the environment Jesus steps into...with all of these hopes and expectations for the future being placed on Him. And in the last week of His life, He'll make two things clear to His disciples.

JESUS IS KING AND THE SOURCE OF HOPE

First, that He IS the King—the Messiah that the people have been waiting for. No other candidate can save God's people...Not the religious leaders with all their laws, not the freedom fighters, not Caesar, not Donald Trump, not Hillary Clinton, not you or me. Anything or anyone other than Jesus in whom they place their hope will ultimately crumble, and those misplaced hopes will end in despair.

So Jesus comes into Jerusalem in a way that says, **"I am King, Messiah. I am the One you must follow."** As we read this story, there are several details that point to this.

In verse 2, for example, Jesus asks for a colt, which is probably a young donkey, that **"no one has ever ridden."** Up until this point, Jesus has been walking everywhere with His disciples. And so His sudden request for an animal to ride on signals that He is doing something intentionally.

Kings and rulers who entered the city would not just walk in; they would RIDE in. And so Jesus does this in order to come into the city with a more royal entrance than if he merely walked in. It's a signal that HE is a King.

It's notable that **the colt had never been ridden.** It could be difficult to ride a young donkey that had never been trained before—especially in front of a huge crowd. But Jesus has power and control over creation.

But the fact that He chose an animal that had never been ridden may also point back to animals in the Old Testament that were set apart for sacred purposes (see Numbers 19:2). And what greater sacred purpose is there, than carrying the Son of God—fully God and fully human—into Jerusalem?

So with this entrance, Jesus is openly pointing to who He is. He wants the crowds to understand that He is King.

And on one level, the crowd gets it. They understand that Jesus is important, and maybe even sense He's the Messiah. So they lay down their coats and branches—an appropriate gesture for a king riding into the city.

WHAT KIND OF KINGDOM?

But what many are probably not clear about **what kind of Messiah He really is**. It would be all too easy to look for that political Messiah who will make Israel great again, and fight for them. Jesus is going to have to clarify that He has come to lead a very different kind of revolution than the one people are hoping for.

Jesus entered Jerusalem as a King, but His entrance on a donkey points to the PEACE with God and humility that characterizes His kingdom. **See Zechariah 9:9 ff....**

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the warhorses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. (NIV)

Though the account in Mark doesn't explicitly reference this prophecy like Matthew does, Jesus is fulfilling it by His entrance into Jerusalem here. And we see a kingdom that is powerful, but a power that brings ultimate peace.

And although we won't focus on this passage, notice the part, "because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners..." A covenant is a relationship based on promises (one example is a marriage), and God's relationship with us is based on His promises that are secured by Jesus' blood that was spilled for us on the cross. He gave His life for us to secure us in a covenant relationship with God—a gift that is for all who will entrust themselves to Him. This King riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is riding

in to die, to bring us back into relationship with Himself. THAT's how He will bring us peace!

So He WILL win victory for God's people, but instead of through an external show of power to overthrow their political oppressors, it will come through humble service and sacrifice, as He, the Prince of Peace, gives His life as a ransom for many. Here is a King who is overflowing with grace and love for you.

So it's possible to cheer for Jesus as king, and yet still have misplaced hope in Him. Anyone who was hoping that Jesus would usher in a political kingdom by force would be sorely disappointed if they didn't ultimately come to see the greater kingdom He would bring by His death and resurrection. Are we asking that Jesus usher in OUR Kingdom, our idea of the good life, or GOD's kingdom—true life?

And in not rejecting the crowd's praise, Jesus was actually willingly walking to His death. The crowds' enthusiasm was the very thing that contributed to the religious leaders feeling threatened...and ultimately sentencing Him to death. So in the triumphal entry, Jesus was knowingly going to His death! THAT'S how He would save His people. (see Hendrikson, 439)

Jesus didn't come to make Israel a flourishing political power once again; He came to deal with sin.

What the Jews did not realize is that even if Rome were overthrown and Israel became a nation once again, God's people would still need to be rescued from sin. It would be like a gardener trying to get rid of dandelions by clipping off their stems: Because he hasn't deal with the root, they will just come up again. And for the Israelites and for us, their political problems were simply symptomatic of the underlying root problem of sin and a fallen world. A political revolution would do nothing to cure the evil at work within their own hearts.

The crowd wants Jesus to solve their EXTERNAL problems, but He's come to first deal with the INTERNAL problem of sin that is the ROOT of the external problems.

And so this morning, in election season, as we cope with anxiety and uncertainty, WE see two truths:

HE IS KING

One, JESUS is King—not Donald Trump, not Hillary Clinton, not any other candidate, not you or I....HE is the Messiah we've been waiting for.

During a campaign, amidst all of the noise and the rhetoric, it can be easy to get caught up in looking to human leaders to save us. We might start thinking that the right person with the right agenda can solve all our problems.

OR alternatively, when we see the faults and sins of the candidates, we might be tempted to despair.

But on Palm Sunday, Jesus reminded us that He, and He alone, is King. He is our Messiah, and Savior. And it's only in Him that we have any real, lasting hope for the future. That doesn't mean that everything already is as it should be because He is King. In the Reformed understanding, we talk about the "already" and the "not yet": Jesus is ALREADY King, but we don't YET see the full outworking of that reality. Perhaps a bit like D-Day leading up to V-Day in Europe: Victory is assured, the enemy is defeated, but there are still battles to be fought.

This keeps us from both misplaced hope and from despair. Because He is King, all who follow Him know that no human can save us, and no human can destroy us.

Because no matter how smart or qualified they are, human beings are not equipped to save us or fix us.

Think of it this way: **A bridge may be rated for loads up to 100 tons,** and that means that a truck weighing up to 100 tons can drive over it safely. But if a truck weighing 500 tons tries to cross, that bridge may collapse. It wasn't rated to bear that weight.

Nothing in creation can bear the weight of your ultimate hope...not any political candidate, not your family, not your spouse, not your career, not your moral goodness, not your ability to reason. None of those things can ultimately satisfy or secure you. And if you try to lean your ultimate hope on anything or anyone other than God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that thing will ultimately collapse under the weight it was never rated to bear.

Jesus is infinitely better at being Savior and King than you or I are, or than any political candidate or anyone or anything else. And yet although this seems obvious, isn't all sin rooted in our attempts to subtly find substitute "saviors" and substitute "kings" and substitute "kingdoms"? We trust in another person to fix us; we trust in our career to give us worth or make us great; we look to our intellect or social skills to help us feel secure; we look to our friends to allay our deepest loneliness; we follow and obey ourselves or others instead of Jesus; we trust ourselves or others to give us the "good life" that only truly comes as we surrender to the only true King.

But as we recognize that none of these substitute "saviors" or "kings" can bear the weight of our hope, **we don't need to despair**...because God commands us to look to Christ this morning—the only King on whom we can lean the entire weight of our hope.

So if you look at a presidential candidate and place your ultimate hope in their ability to make things better, you're missing the message of Mark 11.

And if you look at the presidential candidates and despair, you're missing the message of Mark 11.

And this extends beyond politics to our everyday lives—to misplaced hope or despair.

So if you're putting more hope in your husband or wife (or a potential spouse) to fulfill you than you are in Jesus, you've missed the message of Mark 11.

And if you think that finding exactly the right job, or exactly the right house, or exactly the right friends will make you finally feel at peace, you've missed the message of Mark 11.

No politician, no situation, and no other person can long substitute for Jesus. If we think they can, we will alternate between misplaced hope when they appear to succeed, and despair when they fail us.

So Jesus alone is Lord and King, and He alone loves you more than you could ever love yourself.

THE NATURE OF HIS KINGDOM

The second thing we see here is that **Jesus' kingdom is different from what we might expect.** His Kingdom is marked by humility AND PEACE, and it transcends national borders. Sometimes we try to commandeer Jesus to build OUR idea of the good life, OUR kingdom...but He only brings His kingdom which is the only one we were created to flourish in. Adoption as God's son or daughter, as a free gift to all who receive Him.

So no matter who wins this election, that doesn't kick Jesus off the throne. And even if the result of this election contributes to our country falling apart, His kingdom continues. The United States is not His Kingdom; the CHURCH throughout time and across the globe is His kingdom, and He will build it.

Jesus did not come to Earth in order to make Israel great again, or America great again, or to fight for us or make us stronger together in the way the candidates proclaim. He did not come to Earth so that our lives would be comfortable, or even all that easy.

Instead, He came in order to give His life as a ransom for many—all who receive Him—to claim us as His very own.

And if we recognize that Jesus—not Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton or you or I or anyone else—is King, that involves a choice. **With the crowd cheering for Him in Mark 11, are we willing to do more than just cheer? Are we willing to sacrifice our “substitute saviors” and substitute kings” to Him, receive His grace, and obey Him? Are you willing to pick up your cross, and follow Him?** To humble ourselves before God, and live life in service to God and others?

We as Christians have to remember that **our Savior’s agenda is far bigger, and far better than the United States of America.** Jesus calls us to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven first, and foremost. To spend our time and energy pursuing God’s will for ourselves and for those around us.

And **that doesn’t mean we should be apathetic about voting**, or that we should absent ourselves from politics. In fact, if our hope is rooted in Jesus, that gives us the strength and passion to keep fighting for HIS kingdom in the personal and political spheres of life. Because even if we see political realities that could tempt us to throw in the towel and give up, we know that Jesus is still building His Church. And God has given us the freedom to vote, to represent Him in the political system, and even to protest things that are not honoring to Him. That means we have a responsibility to be good stewards of that privilege. Think about William Wilberforce, persistently fighting for those who had no voice in British politics—and the ultimate abolition of slavery. And think of those fighting policies in the U.S. that are repugnant to God...

And no matter what, **God commands us to pray for our politicians and not despise or hate them**—because HE is the One who has granted them their position, and HE is King. And I think it is impossible to love or respect someone (even if we oppose their policies and campaign against them) as God commands us if we are placing our ultimate hope in them instead of in God—or if we think that they have the power to destroy God’s kingdom. We can only truly love or confront or forgive or pray for others if we recognize that they are not King, and that they can’t kick Jesus off the throne...as we recognize that they are fellow human beings created in the image of God, who need His grace and new life no less than you or I—lest they perish forever. So we are called to pray for them to come to repentance and life, humbled before the true King.

So far more important than the question, “Who will be president?” or “Who will you vote for?” is the question, **“Who is King?” and “Are you acknowledging Him as your King, and are you following Him and seeking His kingdom?”** Jesus entered Jerusalem

on a donkey, humbly and bringing peace with God and other believers by His death and resurrection. He brings peace to all who will receive Him as King! **There WILL come a day of judgment, and on that day He will ride in on a white horse instead of a colt.** He will come to judge all who reject Him and in so doing reject His grace...and to bring salvation to all who belong to Him. But until then, all who hear are called to yield to the One who ushers in God's kingdom, and freely gives it to all who will have Him. None need to fear that day who cling to His mercy and follow Him as their King: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13, NIV)

And **to have Him as your King**, you don't need to do some great moral deeds, or to clean yourself up, or to pretend you're better than you are. Jesus is a King who is full of grace for all who come to Him empty-handed, simply entrusting themselves to His kindness and clinging to the cross. He saves all who call out to Him and yield their lives to Him. He is a King who uses His power to save and transform those who are His, and only judges those who refuse to receive Him and His mercy.

So we involve ourselves in the political system while we have freedom to do so, but we place our hope in the One who is King above all politicians or world leaders.

And as we do this, that also gives an **open door to share this hope with others** who don't yet know Jesus. "Always be prepared..." When you hear someone asking what you think about the candidates, you can share your views—but also share how this election is a profound reminder that your hope can't be in any one politician...the only One who can carry the weight of our hope is Jesus. If they don't know Him, they have nothing...but knowing Him, we and they have a hope that is rock-solid no matter the outcome of this election. And that hope and that King empowers us to fight for true change, as we seek GOD'S kingdom in this world.

No matter the outcome of this election, Jesus is King...a King who is overflowing with grace and love for you, who gives His Kingdom to all who follow Him. His Kingdom is far better than any that any politician can deliver, and far more secure than any politician could destroy.

PRAYER

Father God, You have revealed Yourself through Jesus, and You send Your Holy Spirit to turn us to You and make us new under Your reign. Jesus, You alone are King and Savior—not I, not anyone else or anything else. I yield to You as my King; please rule over me, show me Your kindness, and secure me in relationship with You through Your death and resurrection for me. I also confess that I have placed my ultimate hope in things and people other than You—whether in politicians, family, a spouse, friends, career, myself,

or anything else—and I am sorry. Please continue to turn me from those misplaced hopes to You, and break down everything in my life that stands against You and that steals from You the honor You deserve, that steals from me the life You created me to live, and that steals from others the love You have commanded me to extend to them. May Your kingdom come in my life and in the world...