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. 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.

Going Hoarse for My King on a Donkey

When was the last time that you lost your voice? And I don’t mean because of laryngitis or some other sickness. When was the last time that you got so excited and used your voice so much that you just used it up? I mean, we see this all the time, don’t we? A friend or colleague goes to Lambeau and the next day he can barely talk because his voice is so hoarse. Your sister or neighbor goes to a concert and she comes back with a raspy whisper because she was cheering and singing so loudly.

You don’t do that if you’re lukewarm about something. Even if you’re genuinely excited about something, you might opt to clap or whistle instead of shouting. Shouting takes a good deal of effort and for the most part we don’t expend that energy for just anything. It has to be pretty special.

The people that we hear about on Palm Sunday were worked up and excited. They weren’t just casually interested or mildly curious about this Jesus who was coming to Jerusalem. They were shouting at the top of their lungs, “Hosanna in the highest,” and, “Praise be to God!” These people were genuinely thrilled that Jesus was coming. The question before us today is, “Why?” Why were they going hoarse for a man on a donkey?

As we look at our First Lesson from Zechariah chapter 9 we get a sense of what the people were expecting to see. Here the prophet Zechariah predicts, 400 years in advance, that these people would behold their king coming to them. That’s a comfort. Any time that your governmental ruler – king, president, prime minister – comes to visit you, you’re excited, whether you particularly care for him or not, because it means that he cares about you. He’s not just the king of the kingdom. He’s your king.

As we are introduced to Jesus as the king, we find that he’s described, at least at the start, just the way that you would expect and hope to find a king. Zechariah simply says that he is a king, which means that he is your governor and protector. He creates and enforces laws that serve you. He preserves you from danger from criminals within your community and from enemies outside.

Zechariah describes this king as righteous, which is what we hope every king is – a man who is just and respectable, a man who not only enforces the law, but one who embodies it, an example and role model to children, a trustworthy and reliable ruler for his people.

But then the description of this king takes a turn for the unexpected, and the appearance of this king shifts to something rather strange – so strange, in fact, that most Bible translators change the description to fit their expectation. The words that we read earlier were taken from the most recent translation of the NIV, the New International Version, which is probably the most widely used among Christians. There we heard this king described as “victorious.” That’s probably not what you remember, if you’ve heard this passage before, because the old NIV and the King James Version described him as “having salvation.” What the Bible literally says, though, is that he is righteous and “saved.”

We don’t often think of Jesus as needing to be saved. He’s the Savior, the one who does the saving. But it does fit with both the context of this passage and the life of Jesus to describe him as being saved.

Immediately before these verses Zechariah prophesies destruction for all of the world powers surrounding Israel – places like Damascus and Tyre and Sidon, people who relied on their own power, but whose power could not prevent their downfall. In stark contrast, Zechariah portrays a king here
who looks very different. A king who needed to be saved, looks very different from all those foreign powers.

The more compelling point, though, is that Jesus really did need to be saved. He’s the one who shouted from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He’s the one whose opponents jeered, “He trusts in the Lord. Let the Lord rescue him.” He’s the one who finally said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And we just read this passage last week from Hebrews 5 which says, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.”

And so Jesus is not described in this passage as the conquering hero, but as the one who was saved. The one who was lowly, Zechariah says, and poor. He came riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey. You’d expect a victorious king to ride in on a majestic steed, not a beast of burden. But Jesus comes riding a mule, and worse than that, a baby mule, an untrained and unbroken lowly animal, that wasn’t even his own; he had to borrow it.

This description of Jesus is totally in keeping with the whole of Jesus’ life. When he was born he was laid not in a bassinet or crib, but in a feeding trough for cows and donkeys. Throughout his life he depended on other people because he didn’t have anything of his own, not even a place to lay his head. And in the Gospel of Luke we find out that he was bankrolled by former prostitutes and demon-possessed ladies whom he had helped.

Everything about this coming king is lowly and poor. He’s a strange looking king. So why on earth should the Daughter of Zion or the people of Jerusalem, why on earth should you or I shout aloud in joy for this poor king? The answer, I think, is expertly crafted in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus may not have looked the part of conquering king, but he sure got the job done.

That’s what we read in verse 10. God says, “I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken.” Again, the translation leaves a little to be desired, because what God literally says here is that he will “cut off” the chariots and warhorses. He won’t just take them away, or store them up in stables for future use. He will destroy them, because there will be no need for the implements of war anymore. That’s why the battle bow will be broken, because this strange looking king will “proclaim peace to the nations.”

Peace means an end to conflict. Think of all the world powers that Zechariah mentions in the previous verses. God says that they won’t be a threat anymore. We don’t have to fear any battles or any war with any foreign powers.

Peace means an end to dissention. Think of the civil war that arose even among God’s chosen people. They destroyed each other and finally broke apart and formed two separate kingdoms. That’s why Zechariah references Ephraim and Jerusalem. He says that we don’t have to fear disagreements with each other.

Peace means an end to strife. Think of all the problems that you find yourself in every day – the arguments, the passive aggressive and outright aggressive oppression, the feeling that everyone and everything is against you. Zechariah says that this king will end all that. No, he says your king will end all that.

But that brings us back to the question, how can a king who needs to be saved himself, bring us peace?

To answer that question, I’ll borrow some words from another prophet, this time Hosea: “I will save them – not by bow, sword, or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the LORD their God, will save them.”

You see, God doesn’t “follow the rules,” i.e. he doesn’t use the tools that we would use. His tools are better and much more effective. He doesn’t need a powerful warlord to subdue the armies of this
world. He’s the LORD of Hosts! All he needs is to speak peace and it will be. It’s the same way that God made the world – with a word, not with bang, but a whisper, “Let there be... and there was...” It’s the same way that God brought peace to mankind’s heart before our king came to us – with a word of promise. “All nations will be blessed,” “the king will come.”

God works through his word, and especially through his Word made flesh, through Jesus Christ. He wasn’t powerful or kingly in the way that this world views power; he didn’t come with the sword. He came in poverty and lowliness. He was poor, so poor that he rode a borrowed baby beast of burden into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. So poor that he couldn’t even afford to keep his own life. Instead he spent everything he had – his holy precious blood – to buy us peace.

When Jesus died on the cross he paid the ultimate penalty for our sin and he died. His lifeless body was carted off and buried in a tomb. He needed to be saved. And he was. The Lamb that was slain was also raised from the dead by his God and Father and he was made to be the firstfruits of those who fall asleep in the Lord, the first to be raised to new life.

That’s the picture of the King who comes on Palm Sunday - simultaneously saved himself and the one who brings salvation to the nations. To all people. To you. If you ask me, that’s cause for rejoicing; that’s reason to shout aloud for joy. Christians don’t feel lukewarm about our Lord; we’re not just curious about this Christ. We are exultant and excited; we’re crazy for our King. We shout aloud and when we do people hear. And that’s good news, because my King is your King, and your King is their King, and the peace that our King brings is for everyone who hears. Our King will reign from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

On Palm Sunday, as we think about the LORD of Hosts, the Sovereign LORD, the King, we can’t help but to look forward also to the second coming of Christ when every knee shall bow and acknowledge Jesus as the true, albeit strange-looking, Lord, the Prince of Peace, the Lamb that was slain but has been saved and that gives salvation to me too. When he comes again we won’t fear our voices giving out or being hoarse, we’ll only wish we had a thousand voices to sing, “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 heaven!” Until that time, with incessant prayer we do endanger our voices with the constant petition, “Come Lord Jesus. Come quickly. Amen.”