Celebrating traditions is one of the things that most people have in common. We might not all celebrate the same ones or celebrate them in the same ways, but most everyone has something they celebrate the same way every year.

**What is one of your favorite traditions that you celebrate—either something you grew up celebrating or one that you started?**

In today's passage, we are going to see the start of the story that inspired one of Christianity's earliest traditions: Jesus' resurrection from the grave. But before we get to that part of the story, we have to take a look at what came before it. Jesus wasn't exactly the thing people expected Him to be; He was something so much better.

**Out loud, read today's passage: Matthew 21:1-11**

_When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethpage at the Mount of Olives, Jesus then sent two disciples, telling them, “Go into the village ahead of you. At once you will find a donkey tied there with her foal. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them at once.”_  
_This took place so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled:  
_Tell Daughter Zion,  
“See, your King is coming to you,  
gentle, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt,  
the foal of a donkey.”_

_The disciples went and did just as Jesus directed them. They brought the donkey and its foal; then they laid their clothes on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their clothes on the road; others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them on the road. Then the crowds who went ahead of him and those who followed shouted:  
Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!_

_When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in an uproar, saying, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”_
Jerusalem was right in the middle of celebrating one of the biggest events in the nation's history: Passover. At this time, there were probably around 2 million people inside of Jerusalem’s borders, since Jews from all over the world would have made a trip to be in their holiest city for all of the festivities.

These verses show the first time in Jesus’ ministry where He called attention to Himself instead of cautioning people to keep quiet about Him. He was accomplishing two things: He was fulfilling a prophecy, and He was forcing the hands of the Jewish leaders who wanted to kill Him.

**What does Jesus riding a donkey tell us about who He was as the Messiah?**

**What does it tell us about His humility?**

Jesus' actions fulfilled the prophecy quoted in verse 5 about the way the Messiah would make His entrance, but it also showed us a sacrificial lamb willingly walking into His death. By making His entrance in this way, He showed who He was, but He also painted a huge target on His back. Now, the religious leaders would be able to call Him either a political radical trying to overthrow the government or a false prophet daring to call Himself God.

The crowd’s reaction showed exactly what they thought, though. They started spreading their coats and palm branches: two highly symbolic gestures reserved for political leaders. People would spread their coats on the ground so that a king could walk on them and not dirty his feet; palm branches were a symbol of Jewish nationalism and political victory.

Also, the crowd was shouting “Hosanna,” a phrase that means “May God save us!” We have phrases like this still today. “God Bless America” can either be a humble prayer for God to bless us or it can be a cry to express that America is Number One. Israel thought that Jesus was finally there to even the political odds.

**Read these verses about what people expected Jesus to be:**

**Matthew 2:1-4**

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Christ would be born.*

**John 18:36-37**

*“My kingdom is not of this world,” said Jesus. “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” “You are a king then?” Pilate asked. “You say that I’m a king,” Jesus replied. “I was born for this, and I have come into the world for this: to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”*

**Acts 1:6**

*So when they had come together, [the disciples] asked him, “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?”*  

**What kind of expectation do you think people had of Jesus? What makes you think that?**
How did Jesus subvert—or go against—their expectations?

What kind of expectations do you think people have of Jesus today?

It seems like everywhere you go, people want something different from Jesus. Some want Him to be something they can add to their lives to make their pain go away. Some want Him to be a genie to help them find “success.” Some want Him to be what they call on when they’re in a tough spot and need something miraculous to get out of a bind. Some want Him to rally behind their political position or be a “gotcha” in an argument.

How do you respond when Jesus doesn’t do what you think He should, even if your expectations were completely wrong?

The end of today’s passage shows that the people in the crowd understood that Jesus was someone very important. They even recognized that He was the one who had been prophesied for a long, long time. They honored Him and treated Him like the King He is, but they didn’t see Him for what He actually is: the one who would save their souls and make it possible for them to enter a relationship with God. He was most certainly a King, but He wasn’t just the King of the political state of Israel; He is the King of a Kingdom that is eternal, boundless, and far, far bigger than anything we’ve ever known.

What is the difference between honoring Jesus as a prophet or a teacher or even a “good man,” but not honoring Him as the Son of God?

If someone were to ask you how to know Jesus, what would your response be?

If we want to get to know Jesus, we have to spend time in His Word. There’s no way around it. We cannot rely on other people’s opinions, on the media’s characterization, or on preconceived notions of what we think He should be like. When people in the New Testament recognized Jesus as the Messiah, it is because they saw that He was consistent with what the Word said about Him. Nothing has changed between then and now. If you want to have an encounter with Jesus, begin by searching Him out in the Word of God.

Take a few minutes to respond to the following questions on your own, in the quiet of your own heart.

Who is Jesus to me?

How am I honoring Jesus as King in my life?

How can I do this better?

As you close your time together, take time to pray for the people in your Life Group to be:

- People who display their allegiance to King Jesus.
- People who speak the truth about who He is.
- People who live in such a way that those who don't believe in Him want to find out more about who He is.
Extra material:

Daniel Doriani on “Hosanna”

Even if most of the crowd does not genuinely believe in Jesus, they know he is a prophet and a healer. And perhaps some true disciples believe this is the day Zechariah foretold. Therefore, they give Jesus all the royal treatment they can. In homage, people lay their garments on the donkey, so the king need not ride bareback (21:7).

They lay clothes on the ground before the king’s animal (as they did for Jehu in 2 Kings 9:13), giving him royal treatment. They cut palm branches and lay them on the road (as they did for Simon Maccabeus after he liberated Jerusalem in 165 b.C. [cf. 1 Macc. 13:51]). The king’s mount will not even touch ground, because “a very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.” They shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Matt. 21:8–9).

The crowds that go before and after Jesus form a procession that shouts a blessing. They quote Psalm 118, which celebrates the victory of “him who comes in the name of the Lord.” They sing “Hosanna” which means “May God save us.” It is a festal day. The people celebrate their hope that God will deliver them and think Jesus may be their deliverer.

But something is wrong. First, “Hosanna” was often a nationalistic cry, rather like “God save the king” in England or “God bless America” in the United States. “God bless America” can be the humble prayer of a Christian, or it can be the proud word of someone who is convinced that God is on America’s side, whatever Americans do. But God is Lord over all nations and peoples. No nation can claim his favor without regard to the way they live. God blesses as he chooses. His special interest lies with his faithful people—a nation without borders—not one racial and geographical entity or another. The Lord does not come to confirm and fulfill our selfish plans for the political or economic blessings we think he should give us. He cares equally for all of his servants.

There is a second problem with the crowd’s praise. When they acclaim the “Son of David,” they are thinking of a king, like David, to fight and destroy the foes of Israel. They hope for a warrior king like David, to liberate Israel from their Roman oppressors. One popular writer said: “Lord … raise up for them their king, the Son of David, to rule over your servant Israel… Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem from Gentiles, who trample her to destruction. And he will be a righteous king over them … and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.”

and on “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee”

To be precise, the crowds call Jesus “the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (21:10). The term “the prophet” means some thought of him as a great prophet, mighty in word and deed. Most prophets either performed miracles, as Elijah and Elisha did, or spoke for God, as Isaiah and Jeremiah did. But only Moses and now Jesus both spoke and performed miracles. Yet if the term “the prophet” is encouraging, the phrase “from Nazareth” is probably disparaging, for Nazareth is not much of a town—“Can anything good come” from Nazareth (John 1:46)? If not, then how great can Jesus be?
This crowd's comment is hardly surprising. The crowds always thought Jesus was a great man, but little more. Then and now, the masses always seem to be in the dark. They honor Jesus superficially. At the time, no one fully understood Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (John 12:16).

Warren Wiersbe on the spiritual blindness of the crowd

Keep in mind that this Passover crowd was composed of at least three groups: the Jews who lived in Jerusalem, the crowd from Galilee, and the people who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead (John 12:17–18). Sharing the news of this miracle undoubtedly helped to draw such a large crowd. The people wanted to see this miracle-worker for themselves.

But the Jews still did not recognize Jesus as their King. What caused Israel's spiritual blindness? For one thing, their religious leaders had robbed them of the truth of their own Word and had substituted man-made traditions (Luke 11:52). The leaders were not interested in truth; they were concerned only with protecting their own interests (John 11:47–53). “We have no king but Caesar!” was their confession of willful blindness. Even our Lord’s miracles did not convince them. And the longer they resisted the truth, the blinder they became (John 12:35ff).

Grant Osborne on Jesus’ meekness

A great deal of emphasis falls on Jesus’ πραΰς (praus), his “meekness, gentleness, humility,” continuing the theme of Jesus' humility from 11:29 (“meek and humble in heart,” cf. 5:5; 12:18–21; 18:1–4; 19:13–15; 21:5; 23:12). Thus the entry into Jerusalem is the antithesis of “triumphal” in the way meant by the pilgrims who acclaim him Messiah. They are thinking of the conquering victor, while Jesus intends it of the suffering Servant of Isa 53 by riding a donkey rather than a warhorse. Jesus will become the Davidic Messiah on the cross, not on a battlefield.

and on Matthew’s “supposed misinterpretation” of Zechariah

Another big issue is the question of the two animals, the donkey and the colt, especially since in Zech 9:9 it is “on a donkey, (namely) on a colt.” Many critical scholars believe Matthew has misinterpreted the parallelism of Zechariah (perhaps because of a literal reading of the LXX) and created two animals. But this is surely unnecessary, for Matthew would certainly be aware of Zechariah and probably altered it slightly to fit the historical facts. As many have said, it would be natural for the mother to accompany an unbroken colt on such a journey, and so Matthew is pointing to literal fulfillment.