

“Who Is This?”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon*

Palm Sunday, 5 April 2020

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” ⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, ⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” ¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Everyone loves a parade, or so the old saying goes. I know I do. I still have fond memories of the Fourth of July when I was a boy, of riding in my father’s Dodge convertible, big banners on either side of the car. In my memories, it is always sunny, the crowds lining the side of the road are always cheerful, the leaves on the trees provide a welcome canopy of shade on a hot day, and the delays—well, we had trouble with a tank sinking into the pavement one year, but that’s a story for another day.

Parade problems are less easily lost in the mist of memory when one is on Fifth Avenue in New York and part of a group with a float that’s literally falling apart. While I am sure we were embarrassed and worried about what was happening to our entry, it is now the stuff of humor. I will always recall one of our teachers improvising by yelling out to the crowd “the world is falling apart and it’s our job to keep it together!” as our globe-shaped float did its best to come apart on the streets of Manhattan (which, I must confess, it pretty much succeeded).

Now, parades each have their own characters: Sometimes, there is a guest of honor, other times marching bands or floats. Some may be martial processions, others a carnival on the move. They may be part of solemn religious ceremonies, or meaningless secular

gatherings. Despite these differences, however, most every parade shares these things in common: marchers and spectators.

This was certainly true of Jesus' "parade," more commonly known in the Church as his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, as it is related in the Gospel of Matthew. This procession was fraught with symbolism and meaning, from the donkey and colt to the cloaks and palms, that to contemporaneous observers would have had unmistakable significance: Jesus, the messiah, was claiming his kingdom.

Elements of his entrance can be traced back to the prophecies of Zechariah, who foretold how the messianic ruler would arrive. He spoke of the two animals, a detail picked up on by Jesus, and that his steed was a colt (and not a warhorse). The new king was to be a herald of peace coming to a violent world. The cloaks laid on the ground were a sign of obeisance, an acknowledgment of Jesus' regal position by the gathered people; the palm fronds were a symbol of Israel, giving all of this a distinct flavor, one that repudiated both the Romans and the collaborators. Jesus, they were saying, represented the new Israel, the true Israel.

Matthew writes that the crowds were large, and we might imagine boisterous, too. As they were crying out "Hosanna!" the people were calling for Jesus to literally save them. However, some commentators speculate that Jesus was merely engaging in street theatre, that his crowds were actually small. But the explosiveness of the events that followed in the days that followed, from his making a scene in the Temple courtyard when he overturned the moneychangers' tables, to his trial before the Sanhedrin, and then Pilate, suggest otherwise. Jesus was a big deal, a man with a following when he entered the capital. And as easy as it is to argue that if this was so the Romans or the religious authorities would have arrested him before things escalated, or even really began, we would do well to remember that while the love of power has not changed over the years, the capacities of the police state have.

Perhaps, when Jesus entered the city, the different authorities hoped to manage the ruckus.

Perhaps, they believed Jesus was all smoke and no fire, that he would fizzle out and with him the crowds.

Perhaps, they wanted to avoid inciting a riot or insurrection.

We simply do not know. What we do know is that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, nobody understood what he was about to do or how he understood his calling.

Matthew tells us the "whole city was in turmoil." We may interpret this the way we would approach John's use of the term "the Jews"—not in its literal sense but as representative.

Just as “the Jews” would be better seen as meaning “those Pharisees or Sadducees that opposed Jesus” or “the religious establishment,” we can understand “whole city” to mean the “elite,” the “movers and shakers,” those who would find Jesus and his message threatening or challenging or dangerous. Still, these are the people who should know who Jesus was, who, steeped in all their knowledge of Scripture, should have recognized him as the messiah. But no, they did not.

Instead, they just ask a question: “Who is this?”

And the answer? Well, it was not much better: *This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee*, the people said. This claim was as true as far as it went, but it was missing so much. It’s like saying that Hope Diamond is a rock, the Taj Mahal a building, or Air Force One is an airplane. These descriptions might be accurate, but only partially so, and they may reveal as much about the viewers desires as they do their understanding of what they are trying to describe.

The people of Jerusalem, along with all the people of Judea, had lived with occupiers for centuries. Babylonians, Persians, Syrians, and Romans. The rulers may have changed over the years, but the hope of Israel never died. One day a savior, an heir of David, would free them from their oppressors, restore Israel to its rightful place among the nations, and bring peace and prosperity to her people. The crowds assumed that Jesus might be that man.

A miracle worker? Check.

A rousing orator? Check.

A man who was not afraid to challenge the authorities? Check.

Was it too much to hope that he was also a revolutionary, a military figure in the mold of David? On that day, perhaps not. But wishing for something does not make it so. In the coming days, the hopes of the people would be dashed. By Thursday they would be calling for Jesus to be executed. And all because he didn’t fit their vision of what he should be.

Clearly many of them had never heard him before and had no understanding of what he represented. Consider them to be hangers-on. But it also would seem to be true that those who knew Jesus failed to understand what he was all about. In Jesus, Israel was getting king, priest, prophet. But in each of those roles, he would do the unexpected, behave in such a way that the people would consistently fail to correctly answer the question, “Who is this?”

Jesus, descendant of David, anointed by God, was to be a king, but not what the people anticipated. They envisioned military skill, political acumen, a fine palace. But Jesus would win no earthly battles, cut no deals, and his throne would be a cross.

Jesus, who turned water into wine, who taught in the synagogue and the marketplace, was to be a priest, indeed a new high priest. But rather than be a descendant of the house of Levi, prepared to officiate at the rituals that defined life in the Jerusalem Temple, he came to overturn the old order so that true worship of God might be instituted.

Jesus, who interpreted Scripture in surprising new ways, came not to speak truth to power, as the prophets of old did to the kings of Israel and Judah, but to speak truth to all, a truth many were unprepared or unwilling to hear or receive.

Still, this was Jesus: king, priest, prophet. And it would be in his seeming failure, when he was condemned to die on a cross, abandoned by just about everyone, that the outlines of God's ultimate victory could start to be delineated.

Jesus the king would rule all of God's people through his service.

Jesus the priest would worship God through his service.

Jesus the prophet would show God's way through his service.

It is in Jesus that we see the call to serve without reservation, without expectation, to serve with a love unbound, a call that is something magnificent and something demanding, but most important of all, it is something for each of us and all of us to hear and to embrace.

During these days of coronavirus, we may wonder what relevance this old story from Scripture has for us today. This Palm Sunday there will be no robed choir singing anthems, no procession of children marching around the sanctuary as *All Glory, Laud, and Honor* is played on the organ, no sense of excitement and joy as we pause before turning to the darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But it is in these days in particular that I believe the question, "Who is this?" might be asked with a greater hope of our giving the correct response. Instead of focusing on our traditions, of doing things the same old way, perhaps we will allow ourselves the spiritual space to look anew at Jesus, to really try to hear his message, and set aside our misguided hopes in favor of God's life-giving truth, grace, and love.