

“Not What You Think!”
Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11
First Presbyterian Church
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Today begins Holy Week, the last week of Jesus’ earthly ministry. But for those of us who know the rest of the story, it is hardly the end. Rather, it is just the beginning of something so new and different that it is hard to get our heads around it. Now begins Jesus’ eternal reign over all that he created, over all that is truly his. But that is really next week’s story. This week we see him identifying himself for all to see, but virtually nobody on this day had any idea who he really was. Many thought they knew, but they were all wrong, including the disciples.

It is tempting to think that if we had been in their shoes, we wouldn’t have been so dense, but I think we would not have understood any more than they did. All the disciples had witnessed Jesus’ miracles over the three-year period in which they followed him. They had seen the lame healed. They had witnessed the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead. They had seen the dead Lazarus exit his tomb, still wrapped in the grave clothes. Peter had walked on the waters of the Lake of Galilee, and Peter, James, and John had all been present when Jesus was transfigured on Mt. Hermon and his appearance was virtually blinding.

After all these experiences, the disciples were sure that they knew who Jesus was. As Peter succinctly put it, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” He was the long-awaited Messiah, and that was absolutely true, but no one had any idea what it meant to be the Messiah. To every one of them, the messiah they were waiting for was a warrior, a general, who would lift the yoke of Rome from their necks and free the country from oppression. All of the disciples and the people in general, at least in their inward beings, were all Zealots. They were just itching to see the Romans destroyed. That, they believed, was exactly what the Messiah would accomplish.

They were looking for a Messiah like David, riding into Jerusalem on a war horse after a great victory over the Philistines or over one of the other neighboring nations. To a degree, Jesus built on these expectations as he entered Jerusalem

on that first Palm Sunday over 2000 years ago. He seems to have planned his entry ahead of time. William Barclay in his commentary on this passage suggests that Jesus had made arrangements for the young donkey to be available to him when he needed it, and that the “password phrase” the persons coming to collect the animal would use would be “The Lord has need of it.” When the owners heard the disciples say those words, they immediately released the donkey to them.

With all their kingly Messianic expectations pressing to the fore, the disciples placed their robes over the donkey’s back, placed other robes on the path, and cut branches to wave as a symbol of the greatness of the person who was coming. The shout “Hosanna” was raised, and it meant “Save Now,” for that is what they were hoping for. But apparently no one noticed the incongruities of the scene.

Conquering generals did not ride a donkey when returning from or going off to war. They rode horses, and that should have been the first warning that things were “Not What You Think.” Secondly, when they reached the Kidron Valley at the bottom of the hill, they didn’t turn right and head for the Antonia Fortress where the Romans were garrisoned, but rather they turned left and headed for the temple. This was a religious act, not a military announcement. Those wanting a military commander weren’t going to get one.

But I think Judas just couldn’t give up on his belief that Jesus was the Messiah in the model of David. You can practically hear the wheels going, and Judas deciding that all Jesus needed to call out the troops was just a slight push. Thus, he decided to sell Jesus to the High priest, picking up a little cash on the side while he was at it. But Jesus wasn’t what Judas thought he was. He was, indeed, the Messiah, but one unlike any that anyone had ever imagined, although we get a glimpse of him in Isaiah 53. There we read:

“He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. . . . But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

A suffering Messiah? No one could imagine that, and so the joyous parade went down the hill, into the valley, celebrating something that would never be. Briefly, it was indeed a celebration of Jesus as the Messiah, but when he was arrested and threatened by the Jewish leaders and then by the Romans, his disciples either ran away from him or denied him. Ultimately, in remorse for his lack understanding and his betrayal of Jesus, Judas took his own life.

In contrast, the glory of Jesus' Messiahship is spelled out for us in the first scriptural passage that we read this morning from Paul's letter to the Philippians. One of the fundamental principles of the Christian faith is that Jesus is wholly God, as well as being wholly human. We are not just talking about a prophet of God or just a good person. Rather we are talking about the Second Person of the Trinity, who, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, reigns over this and all other universes.

Think what the Philippians passage tells us about Jesus Christ. He was God and was with the Father and the Holy Spirit from the beginning of all time. He had seen worlds come into being and also, and seen worlds destroyed. He was over all and was the creator of all. Why in the world would he want to leave his throne above and descend into the muck and mess of this world? All through the New Testament we are told that he did it out of love for us. I suspect you have noticed that the human race is not exactly perfect. How could he love us? He loved what he created and what he shaped with his own hands. We were created in his image, and we bore the marks of his divinity in our personhood. What is not to love was his question?

Out of love, then, he leaves his heavenly throne and enters into our world and our lives, first as a tiny, defenseless baby in a manger in Bethlehem. Is he met and heralded by the great and the mighty? Hardly. He is welcomed by a carpenter, a young girl of perhaps 15 or 16, and the local shepherds. Yes, he did have a choir of angels announce his birth, but only the shepherds heard them. The family had to flee to Egypt to escape the death warrant that Herod issued upon learning of his birth, but he just thought Jesus was an earthly being who would threaten his throne. He had no real sense of who this tiny child was.

Most of Jesus' life is spent in a small, out of the way village, and it isn't until age 30 that he appears on the plane of history and begins a 3-year ministry. His love finally brings him to a Roman cross onto which he is nailed. He gives his life to bridge the gap that you and I have created between ourselves and our Heavenly Father, the gap between ourselves and the members of the Godhead. And for that love he is enthroned forever, and ever, and ever and now rules over heaven and earth having put everything that is opposed to God under his eternal control.

Thus, Palm Sunday is simply the beginning of our freedom from sin and death, because it foreshadows what Jesus was about to do for us. Nobody knew that day what was yet to come. Those who hated him because he threatened their position and power, would soon leap for joy for a few hours, until his tomb was found empty. Those who loved him and heralded him would soon mourn for a few hours, before they found his tomb empty, and then they would find joy once again. This time, though, it was not a transient joy, for they would be wrapped in the arms of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, never to be lost again. The joy of Palm Sunday prefigures the joy of the Christian life, lived in a world that has no idea where its center actually is.

We who follow Jesus are called to a new kind of life. It is first, a life of sacrifice like that of Jesus. He asks us if we are willing to give away our life for members of God's family as he has done? Part of that giving can be the concern for the environment that you all have. We know that there is such a thing as "global warming," and that it is harming our brothers and sisters across the world. The gardens out back reflect our respect for all who are trying to survive on this planet. The "green team" is showing concern for our neighbors, even for those who think we have lost our marbles. The solar panels show the same commitment. All these are examples of our commitment to God's kingdom and to his world, and are to be celebrated on this Palm Sunday.

In addition, the world and the church are not just for white people, because Jesus didn't die just for white people. The human race is made up of a variety of persons—some short, some tall, some wide, some skinny, some rich, some poor. They are also not all of the same color. The whites are a minority on the world stage. Instead, we have a palate of colors of all shades. How utterly dull would be the human family if we were all white!! We have people who are of various shades of black. Undoubtedly, that crowd on the first Palm Sunday had Jewish

people from Ethiopia among them who were shouting and hailing Jesus as Messiah.

Most of the people were probably brown in skin color. That was the color of most of the middle east, and certainly for most of the Jews of Jesus' day. I imagine that was Jesus' color. Some of God's children have red skins and have lived in these Americas longer than any of us or our ancestors have. All of us are imports to these shores, and while there were probably no red skins on that day long ago who heralded the Messiah, they do today.

Part of our earthly family also have yellow skin and eyes that slant. God likes variety in his creations. Sameness is so boring, and that is why Passover was such a wonderful time for this Messianic parade, for people literally came from all over the Mediterranean world with all their racial diversity to herald Jesus, the Messiah. Whatever our color, our country of origin, our vocations, our interests, our likes and dislikes, our politics, or our names, we are all God's children and he loves us all. Whenever we look toward God we will rarely find something that we expected to find. He transcends all presuppositions, just as he did over 2000 years ago on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem. We shouldn't look for what we think God will look like, but rather we should ask God to reveal himself to our hearts and minds, so that we may understand him better on this Palm Sunday.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.