

Sunday April 2nd, 2023

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

“Who Is This?”

It was a balmy afternoon in late October in 1982, when Badger Stadium in Wisconsin was packed to overflowing with football fans. More than sixty thousand diehard Wisconsin Badger fans had gathered to see their beloved team take on the Michigan State Wolverines. Within a matter of minutes, it was very clear that the Wolverines were the better team, taking control of every aspect of the game.

What was odd, however, as the score became more and more lopsided, was the sudden and repeated burst of applause and shouts of joy from the Wisconsin fans. Even though their team was getting pummeled on the field by the Wolverines, they were smiling and high-fiving each other as if they were winning rather than losing. It made no sense, to any reasonable observer. What in the world was going on in this stadium?

Well, it turns out that about seventy miles away, the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team, were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the 1982 World Series. Many of the fans in football stadium were listening to the baseball game on portable radios-and were responding to events other than what they saw on the field right in front of them. To someone who didn't know the whole story, such a scene would be confusing and might even lead one to question the sanity of the Badger fans.

Perhaps, I have read this story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry too many times, but I get a sense that to the uninitiated, this scene played out on the road to Jerusalem is confusing. This is especially true in light of what will happen in just a few days on the “Place of the Skull” or as we might know it, Golgotha. What is going on here? Why is everyone so excited, and so ready to condemn in just a few days' time?

Like many of you, I know the elements of the story, and most of the major players, but as I reflect on the joyous, palm stewing crowds that greeted Jesus that day, I wonder. I wonder; are they seeing the same thing I am? What exactly are they cheering about? I am not the only one wondering, what all the fuss is about, because Matthew tells us that the whole city of Jerusalem was stirred up and they asked, “Who is this?”

No one, save Jesus himself, saw the whole picture of what was going on. As appreciated, and as truthful as the celebratory shouts of the crowd were, they would ring hollow in but a few days. The joyous cacophony, flowing along the road into Jerusalem, actually hid the real story. In the crowd of people, sinister plans were afoot. The religious leaders, fearing their own lack of control and prominence, wanted the parade stopped.

They were not praising God, as Jesus, rode into town riding on a donkey. The religious leaders knew full well, and better than most folk, the prophecy of Isaiah 62: 11. “Tell the people of Israel, ‘Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey-even on a donkey's colt.’” Jesus was clearly making a provocative statement. Jesus was calling on those aware enough of the symbolism, to make a decision. This whole scene is Jesus' declaration that he is the Messiah.

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Jesus' entire ministry, all that we know, and much more that we don't know about, comes down to this point in time. Every healing, resurrections, deliverance from demons and all his teaching; are consistent with this scene of Jesus riding a donkey. You can pretend any way you want that this is coincidence, or that Jesus never intended for himself to be seen as the Messiah, but the scriptures don't let you explain it away.

Jesus is declaring he is the Messiah. There is no other conclusion to make from this. Consider if you will, the significance of this Triumphal Entry, that all four gospels record it. All four gospels, call on us to look past the pageantry to the message. All four gospels ask us to stop our shouting, and palm waving, for just a moment and ask, "Who is this?" Who is this, who makes the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dead to rise? Who is this, whose teachings strike to the very center of our being?

Who is this, who dares to ride the colt, in clear fulfillment of prophecy, and declares he is the one; the chosen Messiah? The religious leaders took offence to what was unfolding right before them. They accused Jesus of blasphemy, of overstepping his rightful place. Remember, how they liked to remind people that he was the simple son of a carpenter, a man of illegitimate birth.

They saw Jesus as bold, brash, and almost certainly as arrogant. Wait a minute; let's consider that word, "arrogance". The dictionary defines it as being haughty, or having too high an opinion of one's self. Most of us don't appreciate anyone who is arrogant. All through our lives, we meet people, who consider themselves better than we are. The religious authorities believed Jesus was arrogant, because he assumed an authority, they wouldn't grant him.

A funny thing about arrogance; you can only be arrogant, if the opinion you have of yourself is wrong. Think about that. If I claimed to be the best bass fisherman in the world, I am only arrogant if that claim is proven false. Jesus claiming to be, one with the Father and being the Messiah, is only arrogant if it isn't true. I think that the issue before us today, isn't the truth about Jesus, but rather the religious authorities', and more importantly our own, unwillingness to accept the truth.

They had all the proof any of us could ever want, to prove the validity of Jesus' words; but they just refused to believe. They didn't want to admit they were wrong and the crowds were right. The unwashed, uneducated masses saw the hand of God at work in Jesus; and the privileged, educated scholars failed to see it or believe it. Like that football game in Wisconsin, the religious leaders were listening to something else.

What were they listening to? They were listening to their: traditions, their grip on power, their perceived authority, and it caused a complete disconnect with what was happening on the road into Jerusalem. In their zeal, to protect their externalized spirituality, they missed the significance of the most important message Jesus sought to impart. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, when he cleared the temple, and when he refused to silence the children who sang his praises; was he being intentionally confrontational.

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I believe he was. I believe whole heartedly that Jesus was casting a bright light onto the failure of externalized spirituality. Philip Yancy, in several of his writings, likes to talk about his Bible College experiences. Even though he is being truthful, at least from his perspective, he is hardly being flattering to the college he attended. Here is just a snippet of some of what he experienced.

A friend of mine got called into the dean's office for wearing a coat hemmed higher than her regulation-length skirt. "Joyce, what are we going to do with you!" she was reprimanded, as if she had broken one of the Ten Commandments. Another time she wore a robe down the hall of the woman's dorm with the bottom button undone.

The dean shook her head: "Joyce, how can we trust you?" If you fail in a thing like this, how can God use you?" Later that same student was working in the dean of women's office as Valentine's Day approached. She witnessed the bizarre scene of her boss in white gloves censoring one by one the tiny heart-shaped candies to be used as decorations for a party.

"You're mine, Friends forever, Be my Valentine passed muster; Cutie pie, Hot lips, Love Ya, went right into the trash can. (What Good is God? pg. 123) The Religious leaders in Jesus' day were very good at making rules, and very good at enforcing those same rules on themselves and on others. However, they fell into a dangerous trap. They began to see their reliance on rules as the only way to gain God's approval.

Furthermore, their reliance on rules distracted them from more important matters like justice, and mercy. Jesus used some of his most vivid and harshest words to challenge this externalized spirituality. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a colt; demonstrated, Christ's willingness to embrace all of humanity. Into this clamoring sea of humanity, many of who maybe never saw the significance of this ride, Jesus enters in.

Perhaps Jesus broke the Pharisee's rules of decorum, and their rules about contact with the unwashed masses, but he demonstrated a higher purpose. "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." The spirituality that the religious leaders promoted was a façade. "It was a whitewashed tomb", to borrow Jesus' words. True followers of God: ride, walk, drive, and fly into the messiness of life, regardless of the cost.

I am sure, no one here will doubt what Jesus' little ride cost him? The crowds shouted, and waved palm branches, and threw their coats on the road, because there was a fresh wind blowing. Someone, who claimed to be sent by God, was not only willing, but went out of his way to reach people. Not just the respected, rule following people, but even the worst of the worst; tax collectors and prostitutes.

No wonder they praised him. How long had they waited for some hope, some sense that God cared? Comparing their lives to the high standards promoted by the religious elite, the vast majority despaired. "I can never live up to that level of rule keeping." Faced with the daunting goal of conforming to such a high level of rule keeping, many just simply stopped trying, or they began living double lives.

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Their spirituality became a matter of convenience. Appear spiritual, at least publicly; but do whatever you want, as long as no one sees you, or catches you. Following Christ is not about giving the appearance of a spiritual life, regardless of how long your rule book is. Following Christ means having your heart changed, not your rule book. If our hearts are not redeemed, then we are nothing but whitewashed tombs.

We have cleaned the outside of our bowls, but left the inside untouched. The implications of an externalized faith are staggering. Phillip Yancy tells of an Iranian Muslim intellectual who was visiting a Harvard Professor, and made the following observation.

“These young people may be lost to Islam forever...They follow the conventions of Islamic dress and custom because they are required to do so by law, but inside their hearts are hollow and cynical. We are losing an entire generation of unbelievers in our zeal to force conformity.” (What Good is God? Pg. 131). These words, about Islam could also have been said about whole generations of young people raised in the Christian church.

In Jesus’ day, there was also a whole generation of people in danger of being lost to God, because their hearts were hollow and cynical. People who were tired of the hypocrisy, and the burdensome rules, that those entrusted to shepherd them had forced on them. If there was no hope of ever connecting with God, either in this life or the next, why bother to harbour hope? If it is God’s will that I be: poor, blind, lame, forced into an immoral lifestyle, why would I want to seek him out?

You wouldn’t, but the good news is that God came and sought us out. The lost have been found. The poor have been made rich. The blind can see. The lame can walk and the dead have been raised to life. I was surprised to learn something this past week about the city of Memphis Tennessee. Most of the time, like many of you perhaps; when I think of Memphis, I think of Elvis Presley’s, Graceland Mansion.

What I was pleased to learn is that in Memphis, there is a very special museum dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The museum is actually constructed around the motel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Inside the museum are many films and pictures of the violent police actions against protestors. One, of the displays, is of a charred Greyhound bus burned to a crisp by an angry Alabama mob.

The angry mob was intent on chasing away the Freedom Riders, who were seeking to integrate transportation. As the bus burned, the angry mob held the doors, hoping to incinerate the young riders inside. Thankfully, with help from some highway patrolmen, they were freed in time from the burning bus. The Freedom Riders and many others sought justice, and the right to eat, sleep and ride wherever they wished.

Martin Luther King Jr. on the day he was killed gave his final speech entitled “I’ve been to the Mountaintop.” He said in part, “I may not get there with you but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.” (What Good is God? Pg. 176)

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I like to think that Jesus' ride into Jerusalem may have been the ultimate Freedom Ride; a ride to call all people out of the darkness and into the light of hope.

And just as the Freedom Riders encountered: resistance, hostility, and violence, the cause of Christ will face all this and eventually it will cost Christ his life. So, here we are again, as we are each year at this time, hearing the familiar story and launching into Holy Week, but what does it mean for us personally. Can we see the truth in Jesus' ride for our freedom?

And more importantly, are we able to answer definitively that we know the answer to the world's prevailing question. Who is this? It is Jesus, the Son of God, our Lord and King. So, come join the chorus that resounds from the road to Jerusalem. "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"