

Who Is That Man?

Matthew 21:1-11

First Presbyterian Church

April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Bible Reading

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."

WHIT

"Back in the day" it was a Saturday morning ritual for boys my age. At the first sounds of the William Tell Overture, I would park myself in front of the television just in time to see that huge white horse rear up on its hind legs in the gleaming sunlight. After which I would sit transfixed for the next half hour as the Lone Ranger and his trusted companion, Tonto, battled bad guys throughout the American West. One of the things that remains etched in my memory after more than 60 years... is that moment at the end of every show when someone..., from somewhere... would step forward and ask the sheriff: "Who was that Masked Man?"

What a great caption that would be for the story of Palm Sunday. For although Jesus didn't wear a mask, this IS the question the whole city of Jerusalem was asking at this great moment in Jesus' life: Who is this man? It's an important question – Who is Jesus? How do you finally get to know who Jesus truly is?

HEATHER

Well, certainly one way to begin to get to know someone is to learn their name... what they do... the labels that go along with them and give a description of who they are. Last names in a smallish southern town like this can be sort of a give-away. Of course, you and I don't just have names, we are fancy, we have titles. People assume because we have Reverend in front of our name or Rev. Dr., well they assume certain things about us. Like that maybe we don't say bad words - which you all know I need to work on. Titles in the Bible are descriptive; like, prophet, king, emperor, disciple, apostle...there are lots.

When Jesus asks the disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is, they answer, *some say John the Baptist and others say Elijah or a prophet* - and Jesus responds with, well that's all well and good, but who do you say that I am - and Peter uses an important and loaded title, *You are the Christ, Messiah, the Son of the Living God*. Christ and Messiah; was a title that meant anointed by God; just like the kings or the priests of the past, an anointed leader of the people. So, it *seems* like Peter gets **who Jesus is**. But we know that while it sounds like Peter gets it, he really doesn't get it. In saying that Jesus is Christ, by using that title, he reveals that he believes that Jesus is God's anointed one, and perhaps a king. But everyone is disappointed because the assumptions of that title and the reality of what happens don't match up.

When we moved into our house, Arlie was less than a year old and I was already 6 mos. pregnant with Huntley. And because life was hard, we asked the homeowners if they would let us move in some of our big furniture into the empty house a day or two before closing, but they refused. I felt so desperate I told Xan Pilgrim our realtor, *tell them I'm a minister!*

I thought that title would mean something - that it would tell them who I was. They still didn't let us move anything in. My title, combined with their assumptions, even if their assumptions were good, still meant they didn't know me and they weren't willing to take a chance on something not working out. Just because I have a title, it doesn't tell you everything about me. There have been plenty of people with the same title as Reverend who have proven not to be trustworthy at all.

Trying to know someone based on their name or title doesn't give you the full picture of who they are. When Jesus told his disciples, listen when we go to Jerusalem, this will likely end in my death, Peter is incredulous. *Lord, no! This will never happen to you!* Jesus gives him a harsh rebuke, *get behind me Satan, you are a hinderance to me*. So even a name or title doesn't really give you a full picture of who Jesus is. There has to be something more...

WHIT

Well, another thing we can do to get to know who a person is to watch them... and that's what the people in the crowd were doing that day as Jesus rode into Jerusalem – they watched him in action... to see what he would do... and not only that, to be a part of what he was doing. Clearly, he was the main attraction... but the crowd got caught up in the drama and excitement of it all... some spread their garments on the road... others cut branches from trees and laid them in his path. Some ran ahead and others followed behind... and together they all shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the Highest!" But then a strange thing happened – after the parade had passed and the hubbub had died down... after proclaiming him Son of David and the one who comes in the name of the Lord... they looked at each other and said, "Who is this?" And the answer came back: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Now, you have to understand that the way Matthew looks at things, for someone to refer to Jesus as "the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee," is a lot like calling him "the boy next door who made good" - the small town kid who's now on stage in the big city. And what Matthew wants us to know is that being in the crowd that day watching Jesus gives them SOME sense of who he really is.

I mean, they're right! He IS the Son of David... he DOES COME in the name of the Lord... yet, ultimately it doesn't give them the full picture. The crowds and palms and glorious pronouncements – they tell us some things – but they do not yet make for a true encounter with Jesus the Christ. So how then are we finally to get to know who Jesus is?

HEATHER

Well, Matthew actually tucks a little nugget into his Palm Sunday story that may tell us what it will take for us to really know Jesus Christ ...Jesus says to two of his disciples, “go into the village opposite you and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, the Lord needed it; and he will send it immediately.

Isn't this donkey thievery odd? I remember how in our Front Porch Sunday school class (just a few weeks ago when the world was different), we talked about how strange this episode was; that it looks like Jesus stole these donkeys. And yet it turns out, the donkey exchange was likely prearranged. But the story makes it seem like the disciples aren't in on the plan. Jesus gives them the password or pass code to take the donkeys. And the thing is, the disciples don't ask questions, they just do as they are told. They go get the donkey and bring it back to Jesus. And then it is kind of, oh wait: **IS** the way to really know Jesus, to do what he asks, even when it seems odd? Even when it seems to go against our common sense? Or against conventional wisdom? **Does knowing him truly mean** choosing to follow him even when what lies ahead on the road is danger, threat, and suffering? And then it seems like the answer has been there all along. That the way we, the church, come to know Jesus is through discipleship. A kind of **obedient discipleship** that ‘flies in the face of every rule, every regulation, every book on good manners, all our common sense, every urge for self-security and personal gain.’¹ I don't know about ya'll but if the order were to go get someone else's donkeys for a parade, I'd at least want to know what the plan is.

When the session presents the budget, we don't just say, here's the total we need, now let's vote for approval. No way! It gets broken down so we can see the mission budget and salaries and WNS money and everything. I'm not really the kind of disciple who would just blindly say, *oh you want me to get a donkey that belongs to someone else and bring it to you Lord - okay no problem*. I'd be at the back of the pack asking if anyone kept track of how much wine Jesus had the night before. But the thing is, the disciples do exactly what Jesus asks them to do. They get the donkey, they put down their cloaks and follow him into Jerusalem. Maybe by this point they have learned to do what Jesus asks even when it doesn't seem to make sense because obeying him tells them more about who Jesus is. Doing what he commands - obedient and almost radical, discipleship.

Maybe they can sense that something is about to happen - I mean, one doesn't just parade into Jerusalem during the Passover - maybe they knew that being swept up into God's story of Jesus meant following Jesus, obeying Jesus, doing what he asks them to do - somehow that felt like kingdom work. Our agendas and plans and schedules are mostly self-serving. But God's agenda, Christ's plan invites us to disregard what **we** want and think **we** should do, in order to follow Jesus: to see what God is hoping to accomplish with and through us. “In other words, when the disciples break their own good sense and do what Jesus commands, no matter how strange, [the disciples] begin to experience themselves caught up in the life of God on earth,” the kingdom.

¹ Who is that Man? Palm Sunday Sermon

WHIT

At this point in the story... when Jesus is about to enter the gates of Jerusalem... I imagine the disciples realize once again that their names for Jesus and what they've learned from watching him and what everybody else is saying about him are not at all adequate to fully define him. And I imagine they are realizing that the only way... the only way to truly know him is to follow him... obey him... do what he does... live like he lives. EVEN when it means walking through those treacherous gates of Jerusalem where the risk is high... and the reward is uncertain. But this is the very meaning of discipleship, isn't it? And this is the reason that discipleship like this is the only way, finally, to get to know Jesus Christ.

There's this woman... her name is Donna. Donna was the wife of a successful lawyer... and she went to my church in Louisville. Actually, that's not quite true – she was a “member” of my church in Louisville, but as she confessed later – she joined because she thought her three kids needed something the church could give them. Her two older girls were very active in my youth group... and her youngest, a boy, was a part in our elementary program. Donna was not one for Sunday school and worship... so either she or her oldest would drive the kids to church each week... but Donna would find other ways to spend her Sunday mornings. One day our senior pastor, my colleague, asked Donna to help with our new refugee resettlement ministry. Just a few hours a week... he knew she had the time... just a few hours helping people, some of whom had spent years in refugee camps, helping kids get enrolled in school and adults in English classes... teaching them how to shop in an American grocery store and get through a first-ever checkup with a doctor... how to read a bus schedule and operate a gas stove. Well, “just a few hours a week” turned into a few days a week... and a few days a week turned into what I can truly say was a “vocation.” You remember what Frederick Buechner said about vocation, don't you? He said your vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger... and that's what happened to Donna. Her deep gladness met one of the world's deepest hungers.

My point is that it wasn't in learning Jesus' name or his title... it wasn't in knowing where he came from or who his people were that helped Donna know who he was... it wasn't through watching him at a distance or what countless preachers like me had said about him that she came to know who he is. It was by obeying him... following him... going where he said he would be found... to the people he said he would be found with... it was ONLY in following him that she saw who he is.

At the end of the day, there's only one way to get to know who this man really is. And that way becomes more clear on this day we call Palm Sunday: when we see him climb on a donkey and ride down the dusty path from the Mount of Olives... up Mount Zion... through the gate and into the streets of Jerusalem. The way becomes more clear as we join with others shouting: “Hosanna... save us! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord... Hosanna... save us!” But this way becomes MOST clear when we begin to follow him... in ways that begin to defy conventional wisdom and common sense... to places where the risk is high and the reward uncertain... obeying strange commands... entering dangerous territory in order that our lives might be caught up in his life... and we might finally know who Jesus is.