

Who Is This
Matthew 21:1-11
April 9, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

The people we read about in our text, the ones who welcomed Jesus, were shouting words from the one hundred and eighteenth Psalm. The words they cried are found in verse twenty-six. Verse twenty-five of Psalm one hundred and eighteen says, "O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success." The entire Psalm is about the Lord's goodness. It is a Psalm about the Lord being our refuge and our strength and our helper. So as Jesus rode into town, the people believed they were welcoming their refuge and their strength and their helper...the one who would save them. Of course, they were right...just not in the way they thought they were right.

So this is Palm Sunday...the first day in Holy Week...Jesus' final week...Passion Week. Lots of happenings in this week. I will remind us of what we already know.

Jesus began the week by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus entered the city from the direction of the Mount of Olives. He came from east of the city. The Mount of Olives rested about three hundred feet above the city. It afforded Jesus a great panoramic view. Jesus rode downhill into Jerusalem.

Jesus then entered the temple area and cleared it of the sellers and the money-changers. That angered a few folks. The next couple of days, he told a few stories and did some teaching. He had his authority questioned. He blasted the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and other religious leaders. He called them blind guides and white-washed tombs and stuff like that. This sent them into convulsions. By Thursday, he had been

betrayed and arrested and deserted and denied. Friday, there were some folks who did not care who Jesus was. They just wanted him dead.

But back to the first day of the week. It was a great day. Jesus kind of arranged it. Matthew states that prophecy was being fulfilled. But our text begins with Jesus specifically telling two of his disciples to go into the village—the village of Bethphage—ahead of them. Jesus told them they would find a donkey with a colt. They were to bring them to Jesus.

Now it is good to remember that this final week also coincided with the Jewish Passover celebration. Passover, as we know, was when the Jews celebrated their deliverance from Egypt. It was that time when each Jewish family slaughtered a lamb and put the blood of that lamb above their doors. Lambs were slaughtered during Passover week. It was during this celebration when the Lamb of God was sacrificed for us. This was no coincidence.

Anyway, Jesus rode into town at the beginning of this high and holy week. Jerusalem was crowded. It was crowded because this was one celebration when lots of Jews travelled to the Holy City to celebrate. That was why there were sellers and money changers in the temple area.

Whenever the city swelled with people, Rome feared riots. So the emperor would send soldiers—reinforcements, if you will—to assist with maintaining the peace. Passover was one such time. Remember, later in the week, Pilate would worry that the people might riot. Those soldiers would have entered the city from the

west. They came riding horses. They came as a show of strength.

You kind of see the irony here? While this attachment of peacekeepers from Rome rode in from the west, the Prince of Peace was on his way from the east. And he was seated on a donkey...an animal of peace...a humble beast. Surely you could not take a man seriously who rode a donkey.

But on this day, Jesus was taken quite seriously. The crowd cheered him. Some people took off their coats and laid them along the road in front of Jesus. Many of those people were poor. They probably had just the one coat. Others cut branches from trees and spread them before Jesus.

They called out, "Hosanna!" Today, that word has mostly a religious meaning. Back then it was a word steep with political significance. That one word represented the political hopes and dreams of the day. It meant, "Save us now!" An oppressed people was calling out for deliverance.

So Jesus entered Jerusalem. Note that Matthew states the whole city was stirred...stirred in the sense of they were troubled or shook up. They asked, "Who is this?" Interesting that this journey to the cross began with Jesus asking the question, "Who do people say that I am?" The journey begins to come to its conclusion with people asking, "Who is this?"

But the city was stirred. There was a disturbance in the city of Jerusalem. We read in one other place in Matthew of a disturbance in the city. Remember where and when that was? The second chapter. Magi came from the east to worship the king of the Jews. Herod was disturbed. So was the entire city.

Jesus shows up. And we have a couple of identifiable reactions to his arrival. There are those who are stirred, troubled, disturbed. These would be your very religious people. Like...they don't know what to do. Then there are those who are excited. They know what to

do. Shout, "Hosanna!" These would be your very common folks.

So this got me to thinking. When Jesus shows up, how do I respond? If Jesus rode into town today, what would be my reaction? Would I be confused or disturbed and wonder just who this is? Would I welcome him with praise? Have I ever seen Jesus and not known who this was and then gone off in some other direction?

Now I am going to take a bit of a turn here...because the week took a bit of a turn for Jesus. Fast forward to later in the week. Jesus was standing before Pilate. Pilate had this tradition of releasing a prisoner during the Passover week...a prisoner of the people's choosing. Barabbas was in prison. He was a bad guy. He had led an insurrection. He had killed some folks. He was about an independent Israel...even if that meant much violence. Pilate asked the people who they wanted him to release. The choices were Barabbas and Jesus. The chief priests and the elders led the campaign for the release of Barabbas. They persuaded the crowd to ask for the release of Barabbas. Barabbas was released. Jesus was executed.

So in choosing Barabbas, the people chose the one who kind of embodied everything they wanted in a hero...in a freedom fighter. They chose the popular revolutionary hero. Barabbas may not have been the promised Messiah, but he was at least the type of person they believed the Messiah would be. They thought the Messiah would come marching into Jerusalem...and go up to the Roman political establishment and say something like, "Go ahead...make my day." Or like what Moses, their Old Testament hero, said, "Let my people go."

They chose Barabbas over Jesus. Jesus came in on a donkey. Jesus did not offer even the least bit of resistance when arrested. There was no big battle for political independence about to commence. Jesus invited his followers to deny themselves. The people chose the revolutionary-hero type over the humble-denial-of-self servant. Barabbas

was about excitement and getting. Jesus was about giving and sacrifice...and washing feet.

Confusion reigned. Who is this?

As I said earlier, this season of Lent, this journey to Jerusalem and the cross began with Jesus wondering and asking who the people were saying he was. What was their answer to the "who is this" question? Then he invited those who wanted to follow him to deny themselves and take up their own cross and walk in his exact steps.

What is our response? Today, you see, is a good day...a very good day. Hosanna! Our Savior, our deliverer is riding into town. Praise God! Let's celebrate with a parade and palms. But Jesus did not invite us to stand on the curb and watch the procession pass by. He invited us to get right in there and follow him and listen to him as he continues to teach us about what the kingdom is really like...and follow him into the upper room and eat with him and have our feet washed and experience the full extent of his serving and sacrificial love...and go with him to the garden and stay awake with him...and then follow him to the cross. That is the invitation this week. How do we choose?

Who is this? This is our revolutionary hero who will show us what revolutionary love looks like and is. He will drink from the cup his Father has given him, and he will taste death for us...so that we might feast on the life to follow.

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