

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, "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." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The 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!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

I have a confession to make. Today I'm not going to tell you the whole story. Today we are celebrating Palm Sunday, arguably one of Jesus' better days, but I'm intentionally not telling you the rest of the story of what happens between Palm Sunday and Easter, the story of betrayal and communion, death and sadness that is an integral part of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. I'm not telling you that part of the story because I want to see you here on Maundy Thursday, when we commemorate the Last Supper and the events leading to the Crucifixion. And I'm not telling you because just as resurrection does not have meaning apart from death, so too does Jesus' death have no meaning apart from the triumph of the Resurrection. I have had enough of death in the last couple of weeks, so for today, we celebrate a moment of victory: Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.

We know from our study of the Bible that Jesus was frequently misunderstood. Many people asked, "Who is this man, anyway?" and there were many answers, which were usually at least misunderstood and often just plain wrong. People called him Rabbi, teacher, without understanding that not only did he explain to them the scriptures about God's relationship with Israel, that he was God, opening the scriptures to them. They thought he was a prophet because he spoke with confidence of God's continued

love for the people, and desire for them to be in right relationship, but they failed to understand that he was himself God, calling them to grow closer to him. Almost every time someone asked, “Who is this man, anyway?” the answers were at best incomplete, and at worst, incorrect. Even Peter, who often had moments of shattering, amazing, brilliant clarity, still seemed confused about what the implications might be if Jesus were in fact the Messiah, the Son of God.

The confusion, the questions, the sense of being mystified at this man who embodies the scriptures, who claims to fulfill the prophecies, all started early in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Even though his mother, of all people, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that hers was the Son of God, even Mary must have wondered from time to time, “Who is this child of mine, anyway?” The year Jesus was twelve and gently chastised his mother and Joseph for being surprised to find him in the Temple, “his Father’s house,” she must have asked herself, “Who is this boy, anyway?”

As his ministry began, and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John began to preserve the stories for us, more and more people are left to ask the question: John the Baptizer’s disciples, who hear the spirit of God proclaim that Jesus is God’s beloved Son. The steward at a wedding at Cana in Galilee, who knew that those jars were filled with water a moment before,

but now finds himself serving fine wine to the guests—that steward must have thought to himself, “who is this man?” Tax collectors, sinners, foreigners, lepers, the blind and the lame, their friends and the witnesses to their interactions with Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus...all have the same question.

The day of the great parade into Jerusalem is no different. Just imagine, cast yourself back in time to Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago. You’ve heard the stories all your life of Abraham and Moses, Isaac and Joseph, of the great King David, the man after God’s own heart. You remember the story about the troubled succession when David lay dying and his son Adonijah had himself crowned king against his father’s wishes. You remember how David confirmed Solomon as his own choice for king by having him anointed by the prophet Nathan and Zadok the priest, and then how Solomon rode into Jerusalem on David’s own mule. As you see this man Jesus enter the town, on the back of a donkey, you see in your mind’s eye Solomon and David, you think about the glory days of the nation of Israel, and you wonder, “Who is this man, anyway?”

There are words to describe Jesus. Isaiah does a good job giving us a list of title to describe who Jesus is: wonderful counselor, Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace...I can almost hear the music

now, can't you? Isaiah gives us other words for Jesus as well: suffering servant, wounded for our transgressions, hung upon a tree. He's a complicated guy, Jesus. King of Kings and sacrifice. Even in today's story, he's got some impressive titles. "Lord," he calls himself as he sends the disciples in to fetch the donkey. And can you hear Matthew's little mistake? He was so eager to quote the words of the prophet, to prove that Jesus was the fulfillment of that prophecy, that he has Jesus riding two animals at once: "mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." In the words of the prophecy, Jesus is called "King." The crowds call him the Son of David, and the one who comes in the name of the Lord. At the end, when asked who he is, they call him a prophet.

They're not wrong.

They're just not entirely correct about who Jesus is.

And that's the problem with this week, from Palm Sunday through Easter. Talk about a roller coaster ride: we go from Hosanna to Crucify to He is Risen, in the space of eight days. It's not enough time to absorb all that Jesus is. Eight days is not enough to do the work of a lifetime, to answer for ourselves, who is this man, anyway...but every year, it's the marathon of the Christian faith. From today through Easter, we will be traveling the highs and lows of who Jesus is, and who we are in Christ, who

this man is who rode into Jerusalem that day, and who we are called to be, knowing something of who he is.

He is: a teacher who spoke with authority. The disciples bear witness to that, as do the crowds who gathered to hear him speak. Matthew gives us the story of the feeding of the five thousand. That's five thousand men, plus women and children, who had gathered to hear Jesus teach, and found him so compelling that they stayed past dinner time, with no regard to how they would eat...

He is: the miracle worker, who divided 5 small loaves, and 2 dried fish to feed the crowd. He healed blind men. He restored lepers not only to health, but to their family and friends, and to their community. He healed people of what the Bible calls demonic possession. We don't really know what that was, exactly, epilepsy or mental illness, maybe, but we know it was bad—and Jesus could cure it. Mary and Martha bore witness to Jesus' ultimate healing: the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

He is: the loving heart of God, working to bring relief from sin and redemption to those who are separated from the community: tax collectors, adulterous women, foreigners. They met with gentleness and acceptance from Jesus, and were welcomed into his presence...which led them to

changed lives, to new life, and a faithfulness to God they thought they had lost forever.

He is: a prophet, in the sense of one profoundly connected and listening to God. He saw right through the woman at the well, and offered her living water to satisfy a thirst in her that she'd tried to quench in all the wrong ways. He spoke as a prophet, speaking the words of God to God's people, and expanding the boundaries of who God's people might be... breaking the barrier that said only Jews could know God's favor, and expanding membership in the kingdom of God to anyone who would come to know him. He knew what was to come, and spoke of it: a donkey ready when they needed it, an upper room ready for one last meal, his death and the three days of devastation that would follow, the resurrection.

He is: a rule-breaker, in the best sense of the word. Where the Commandments had been given to make plain how God intended for his people to live together, they had become so convoluted and confusing that it practically required a law degree to have any sense that one was on the right path. He came to break the rules, so that God's intent could be made clear: that God's people might "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." He clarified the rules, so that anyone could understand how to know

God's grace and favor: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Who is this man? He is all these things, and more. He is the Son of God and Son of Man, the great Intercessor who brings a new covenant, a new promise from God, a new hope that we can truly be God's people, and that God will be our God. He is the living God, the Messiah, the Savior... and yet still all these titles, all these abilities, all these gifts fail to do justice to who he is.

There was a silly pop love song a few years ago, in which some guy sang about the girl he loved, "she's so high, high above me," and it's easy to think of Jesus this way. It's easy for us to distance ourselves from Jesus, to put him on a pedestal, so to speak, to say humbly, "we're not worthy" and thus put some space between us and Jesus Christ. It's easy for us to say that this Man, this Son of God, is someone we model ourselves after but will never resemble, or that he must be so busy that he has no time to worry about us. It's easy to think of God not noticing us, or worse, turning his back on us, but we're wrong to do it.

Jesus is all these high and lofty things: the king in the line of David, the one whose coming was foretold, Messiah and Master and Lord. But there are some things Jesus is not: he is not distant. He is not aloof. He is

not unaware of us, nor is he untroubled by our suffering. Ours is an incredibly personal God, who has gone to incredible lengths to know us, and so that we might know him. This time of year, we sometimes hear the phrase, “the scandal of the cross,” and that’s as good a way as any to describe the incredible work Jesus has done, and is still doing, for those whom God loves.

The scandal of the cross is that God would submit to death on a cross, as the song has it, the emblem of suffering and shame, and that by Jesus’ death on the cross, and his resurrection, that we might share in eternal life. It is a scandal because this symbol, this cross with which our church is decorated, should be a sign of sin, shame, and defeat. Instead, in Christ’s resurrection at Easter it becomes a sign of victory and grace. I said I wasn’t going to go there, didn’t I? And yet here we are.

We can’t talk about Jesus, can’t talk about who he was or what he did or what he still does in the lives of people today without the cross. And though I meant it when I said I’d had enough of death in the last few weeks, between my uncle and my grandmother, the truth is that in Jesus, death is always a part of the picture. That’s the scandal, to be sure: Jesus’ death is a necessary part of the picture. It means that Jesus’ life is not all sweetness and light, although it could have been. One might even be bold enough to

say that any self-respecting deity, if embodied, would live the good life, with rich foods and fine clothes and power. But not ours. The scandal is that the One God, the true God, chose to take on not only our form, but our flesh, our struggles as well as our joys, our pain as well as our celebrations, our sorrows and our laughter.

Who is this man, anyway?

Every day, every moment, he is something different to us. Today he is recognized as part of who he is: the one who is to come, the Son of David, the king riding into Jerusalem, like Solomon, to take his rightful place on the throne. We celebrate, we wave the palm branches, and we shout “Hosanna” little knowing that what we shout are not praises but pleading, “Save us.” He is the one who can save us. And he is going to, but that’s a story for Eric to tell in the next week.

Who is this man, anyway? Who is he to you? Who do you need him to be right now? The scandal of Christ is that he lived with us, and he knows us, who we are and where we’ve been, even the bits we’d like to hide from one another. There is nothing we can’t go through that he doesn’t go through with us, from sickness and death to the joy of marriages and births and parties. Who he is, is God with us, all the time. I know I say that just about every time I preach. That’s because it’s true, and it’s important,

and whatever else we know about who Jesus is, this is one piece we can never forget.

He is God incarnate, in flesh. Jesus became like us so he could know us, and in knowing him, we could have a relationship with God that is both personal and communal. Not only is his spirit with us always, he said that when we gather together, there he is, too...which means he's here, now.

He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but has chosen to reign in hearts and lives only when invited in. For some strange reason, it is important to him that we make the choice, that we make the change, that we invite and accept him in. What we then have to offer, God desires greatly: that we would freely choose God, and grace, faith and love as a way to pattern our lives. That we would spend our lives pondering the question, "Who is this man, this Jesus, anyway?" and discovering day after day how rich the answers are.

He was born in a barn, raised in obscurity, spoke with authority even the scholars and priests could not deny. He taught thousands and yet was homeless for years, relying on the kindness of others for his support. He did not accumulate great wealth or power, and rarely showed that they were due him, except on this one day, that first Palm Sunday long ago, when he passed through Bethphage on his way to Jerusalem, riding on the

back of a donkey. What a parade that must have been: men, women, and children throwing their cloaks into the road to cushion his path. Branches cut from palm trees waving in celebration. The crowd's acknowledgement of who Jesus was, even though it was not complete: Son of David, sent by God, prophet. And their cries, which echo our own: Hosanna, Hosanna. Save us. Save us.

Although it seems like praises would be more appropriate, these pleas are appropriate too. The crowd may have been thinking save us from Rome. They may have been begging for liberation from oppression. They may have had in their hearts, "save us from what we have now...anything else you've got has to be better." We don't know exactly what they were looking to be saved from...but just for that moment, they believed they had found their savior. We cry today, "Hosanna, Lord, save us," because we know that in him we have found our Savior.

I could preach here for years and never get to the bottom of who Jesus is. But that's okay. Part of who he is is inexhaustible mystery, unfolding as we need him, as we know him, as we live and love and pray and serve and study. That's okay, because we have eternity to find out who is this Man.