

THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD

April 14, 2019 – Palm Sunday
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Text: Luke 19:28-40 and Philippians 2:5-11

SCRIPTURE

Luke 19:28-40

He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” They said, “The Lord needs it.” Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

What would be considered the greatest painting of all time? We here in Iowa might say the greatest painting would be Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*. Certainly some would regard Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* as the greatest painting. There are others that might be in the running; Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* perhaps or *Whistler’s Mother*. Then there is the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo or *The Night Watch* by Rembrandt. It is hard to pick just one that would be considered the greatest. Perhaps it is impossible to define which one painting is the greatest. Maybe instead we could ask what is the most famous painting of all time. Even then there might be some disagreement, but Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* would have to be in the top two or three, if not the most famous.

It was painted somewhere between 1503 and 1506, and yet for the next 400 years it was relatively unknown. It was acquired by a king of France, sometime before his death in 1547, and was part of the

royal collection until the French revolution when it was hung in the Louvre museum in Paris. It was just one portrait among many until August 21, 1911, when it was stolen. An Italian handyman by the name of Vincenzo Peruggia, who worked for the Louvre, took it off the wall during the normal museum hours and hid in a broom closet. After the museum closed he walked out into the street with the painting under his arm, wrapped in his coat.

It was over 24 hours before anyone noticed that it was missing. This is because the museum was systematically photographing all of its paintings. As I said, at the time it was not that famous. All the guards and employees just assumed that it was off being photographed. But when it was realized that it was gone, officials shut down the museum for a week to assess what had happened. The French press had a field day. It was shortly before World War I and nationalism was running high. Some speculated that the German kaiser was behind it, while others were sure it was some extravagantly wealthy American tycoon trying to add to his private collection of European masterpieces. But many saw it as a prime example of the ineptness of the French government to protect the national treasures of France.

As a result of all this publicity, when the Louvre did open up a week later, there was a huge crowd waiting to get in. For the next two years, until the painting was eventually recovered, the museum was flooded with visitors, all lined up just to see the spot where the painting once hung. The museum officials did not hang another painting in its place, but left it blank. To this day, one of the greatest attractions to the Louvre was not any particular work of art but an empty space on the wall where the *Mona Lisa* once was. Since then, this painting has been, as one writer put it, "the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world." But it had to be stolen and missing before it would become the famous painting that it is today.

Crowd psychology is fascinating. Great crowds of people were more interested in seeing a painting that was not there, than the other great works of art in the museum. A group of people might change the way an individual behaves or reacts. It might even change the way someone thinks. Crowd psychology is also a big part of the story of Jesus coming into Jerusalem, as well as what happens a few days later when he is arrested and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, has to decide what to do with him.

By now, most of us are very familiar with the story of Palm Sunday. It appears in all four gospels and the basic facts are fairly clear. The events start to unfold in a village called Bethpage, about three miles across a valley on the east side of Jerusalem. Jesus could have easily walked the distance, and no doubt did so many times before. But he chose to ride a donkey into the city and that choice was deliberate. Obviously, Jesus must have made previous arrangements with someone in Bethpage, for the disciples were given a password to obtain the release of the donkey. What we call the Triumphal Entry was something that Jesus deliberately planned.

Now, when I have preached on this story before, I have explained that the choice of riding on a donkey was meant to send a message that he was coming in peace. I have said that when a king conquered a city, after the battle, as part of a victory celebration, he would ride into the conquered city on his war horse. But when this same king returned to his own capitol city, he would ride through the cheering crowds on the back of a donkey. Supposedly that was to symbolize that the king was back with his own people, returning to his own throne, his own palace and all that rightfully belonged to him.

So when Jesus came to Jerusalem riding on a donkey, he may have been trying to say, "I have come back to claim what is already mine. I am not seizing power and authority here. That is mine already. I

am returning to take my rightful place.” That is the way I have explained it in some of my previous sermons, and it very well could have been the way it was.

However, I recently came across a different way to interpret this story. As you know, at that time all of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea were a part of the Roman Empire. Now, while Jerusalem was an important city, the center of the Roman government in the region was the seaport of Caesarea, about 50 miles northwest of Jerusalem. So the home base of Pontius Pilate was not Jerusalem, but Caesarea. Now, there was a strong permanent Roman military presence in Jerusalem. But at critical times during the year, such as the Passover, the Roman governor along with a large regiment of soldiers would make a big show of marching up from Caesarea and into the city of Jerusalem. The message would be very clear. You can have your religious celebrations, but don’t even think of anything remotely rebellious or we will crush you completely. Pontius Pilate, probably riding on a war horse, accompanied by all these troops would enter through the gates on the west side of city in a large procession hoping to demonstrate Roman military power, and intimidate the Jewish people into submission.

So a possible interpretation of what Jesus did is that it was meant to be a parody of that Roman procession. After all, if you read through the gospels up to this point Jesus has been preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It is not in some far off future, but here and now, breaking in to the world as we know it. In this kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The rich are poor and the poor are rich. The wise are foolish and the foolish are wise. Those who try to save their lives will lose them, while those who are willing to give up their lives will save them. So, now Jesus enters into the city, not from the west, but from the east; not on a war horse, but on a donkey; not surrounded by soldiers carrying spears and swords, but surrounded by women and children waving palm branches; not with cries of “Hail Caesar!” but with cries of “Hosanna! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!”

If this explanation of the events of Palm Sunday is correct then the crowd that welcomed Jesus was responding to something that was almost street theatre or performance art. They were welcoming a king that was not a king at all, at least not in terms of the way the world understands kings. In some ways it was like the crowds in Paris who turned up to see a painting that was not there. The absence of the Mona Lisa was more interesting than the Mona Lisa itself, and the absence of military and political power was more interesting than any demonstration by Pontius Pilate and his legions of soldiers.

But this king that is not a king goes far beyond a parody or spoof of the Roman muscle flexing. This king is willing to let go of even the slightest hint of power, to be weak to the point of absurdity. So perhaps this is why the same crowd that is caught up with this amusing procession with children waving palm leaves is then appalled and disgusted by a pathetic helpless victim of the iron fist of Rome. The little show on Palm Sunday might have been amusing and entertaining. But by Friday, the foolishness of this Galilean who not only enraged the high priest, but awakened the interest of Pontius Pilate and his army of thugs, well, that was too much. If the Romans want to crucify him, he probably deserves it.

This king that is not a king ties in with what the Apostle Paul was trying to describe in his letter to the Philippians, when he writes that Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...” And the Greek for “emptied himself” is hard to translate accurately into English. It is the opposite of striving to win, or grab the glory. It is willingly

going to the back of the line, letting everyone else go first, making sure everyone else has whatever they need. This is not just a king that is not a king. This is God who deliberately gives up and is not God, because God becomes a human being. Paul describes it as “taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.”

In the Roman Empire, the greatest honor would be a procession into a city, especially the city of Rome. There are many accounts of the emperor or a great general after a victory, parading through the city with captive slaves and the plundered wealth from their conquests. On the other hand, in the Roman Empire, the greatest humility would be carrying your cross through the streets to the garbage dump outside the gates of the city and there be nailed to it and die. That is what Paul is describing in this passage. If the emperor on his throne was great, Jesus was far beyond anything imaginable, equal and one with God. Yet, he was willing to let that go, to empty himself, to go to the most humiliating extreme, even death on a cross. Jesus was willing to do that for our sake, because God loves us so much.

But the story does not end with the humility of the cross. Paul goes on to write, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This self-emptying king who is not a king, this God who stops being God but becomes human, and not just any human, the lowest of the lowest of humans, this is the One that will be exalted above all. This is the name that will be above all names. This is the One, who will turn everything around. This is the One who will topple the empires, bring down the wealthy, the powerful, the proud, the ones who think they have everything under control. The One who was willing to become nothing will be the Great Everything.

At the risk of trivializing it all, one way of looking at the events of Holy Week, is that it is something like staring at the empty spot on the wall after the *Mona Lisa* has been stolen. It is only when we see the emptiness of the cross and the tomb that we can truly understand the beauty and glory of God’s great act of redemption. It is only then that we can kneel in true homage to the King.

But if that is not helpful, perhaps the best way to go into this week is with some honest questions. We opened our service with highlights from the rock opera *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. It asks the questions: Jesus Christ, who are you; what have you sacrificed? We could do a lot worse than ponder such questions: Who is this king who is not a king? Who is this Jesus, this man riding on a donkey? Why is this same man nailed to a cross? What does it all mean? What is he trying to say to me? Because if there is one thing the story of Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter morning teaches us is that God was very deliberate and purposeful when in Christ Jesus he emptied himself to show us his love.

Therefore, if this Jesus is indeed a king, he is not like any other king this world has ever known in the past or like anyone who is ruling now or who will come in the future. This King comes to turn everything upside down, to drive out the darkness with the light of love, to find the lost, lift up those who are beaten down and to bring life where there is only death. Hosanna in the Highest! May the Lord save the people. Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.