

Who is Jesus?
Son of God
Sixth in Lenten Series

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Palm Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

28 After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.
29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, ‘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. ³¹If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.” ’

³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ ³⁴They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As 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, ³⁸saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ ⁴⁰He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴²saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

²Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

¹⁴The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

¹⁵There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

¹⁶the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”

¹⁷I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

¹⁸The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

²³This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

The long journey that began in Luke's gospel ten chapters back when Jesus set his face on Jerusalem reaches its destination. He has been heading there with unwavering focus, but the city will meet him with the divided response that has greeted his ministry all along. The enthusiastic acclamation of today's crowd will ultimately compete with shouts of criticism, rage and violence. It's a disconcerting day, Palm Sunday is, full of irony and reality. A lot of people prefer their Holy Week to be easier, a one stop shopping kind of comfort and joy moving from Palms and Hosannas to Easter lilies, eggs, bunnies and chocolate, as well as hope in our hearts for new life to come. But Christianity without the week ahead and the cross that awaits Jesus would be meaningless.

When he was Pastor and Dean of the Duke Chapel, Will Willimon remembered back to the first small congregation he served. On Palm Sunday each year they erected a large, roughhewn cross on the front lawn, and the church's neighbors complained that it was ugly. Willimon said that ever after he was always tempted on the day before Easter to put up a sign on the front lawn of Duke Chapel which said, "No one gets in to Easter Service who was not here on Good Friday!"¹

Palm Sunday requires we at least point to Friday, because that is where Jesus himself is heading with steadfast determination. However, I have never been one of those preachers who wanted to throw a wet blanket over the joy and celebration of the day. It is important that we hang onto the hope and joyful expectation of those crowds following Jesus, especially this year. We've had so little pomp and corporate rejoicing of late, and it's been three years since our children paraded in worship waving their palm branches. As Pastor Rachel reminded us at the staff meeting this week, when you are five or six, three years is a very long time, and many of our younger children don't remember celebrating Palm Sunday at all.

¹ John Buchanan told this Willimon story, "What We Believe about Jesus: His Example," Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, 4/4/04.

This is a unique day of rejoicing for pandemic reasons, but also because the day reveals God's profound love for us – the height, the depth, the breadth of God's love. For Jesus, this is the existential moment when, looking ahead, he makes a strong decision to keep going with his lonely courage, and brave determination to follow where he believed God was leading him. For us, who follow Jesus down the difficult road into Holy Week, we come to see that no difficulty of our own will ever separate us from God's love, not even death. So today, with Palm Sunday hope in our hearts, and an eye toward God's undying love, we come to the end of this Lenten sermon series asking us to ponder the question, *Who is Jesus?*

Over the last several weeks, the gospel readings have given us glimpses, only partial answers to the question, because the truth of who Jesus is, cannot be measured in a title or words. For today's answer to the question, *Who Is Jesus?* I admit that I borrowed from the broader witness of scripture and Christian doctrine to proclaim him Son of God, even though that language is not in the text per se. Luke's triumphal entry into Jerusalem actually points to multiple revelations of who Jesus is, depending on how you count them. Like those hidden picture drawings, where you have to scan the details and look very carefully, to find images tucked within the larger scene, so it is with Luke on Palm Sunday. ²

Something is revealed about who Jesus is at every turn. It's all in the details. When Jesus enters the city, he pulls two of his disciples aside 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 and bring it here.* Here, Jesus' words and actions proclaim him a Prophet. As one biblical scholar suggests, he's worked out a response to the public relations problem of swiping the colt. ³ *If anyone asks you...*

² Jill Duffield, Presbyterian Outlook commentary, lost date.

³ John Carroll, Luke: New Testament Library, p. 382.

just say this... He tells the disciples exactly what to do and how it will happen when they go for the colt. As if on cue the owners of the colt question why the disciples have untied it, and they are told ‘*the Lord needs it.*’ In the narrative the word *Lord* presents Jesus’ ministry as the ministry of God. The revelatory titles, you see, are beginning to coalesce! Prophet... Lord.... Then Jesus enacts the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy of the long awaited Messiah: *Lo, your King comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on the foal of a donkey.* ⁴

The disciples catch on to the theme in a hurry! They know the new colt of a donkey is the mode of transportation fit for a King who comes to save them, and spreading their cloaks upon the ground for Jesus they create an instant royal celebration. They begin singing the Psalms, the liturgical act repeated every year at Passover. *The Lord is my strength and my might; He has become my salvation!* When the Pharisees ask Jesus to hush his joyful, hopeful disciples who are carpeting his pathway and hailing their king, Jesus says the very stones will cry out quoting the prophet Habakkuk. Jesus reiterates his lament over the city, *if only they knew the things that make for peace*, and we recall his birth announcement from Isaiah, Prince of Peace.

Who is Jesus? According to the Palm Sunday parade, his identity is revealed in every single detail. He is Prophet, Lord, Messiah, King, Savior, Prince of Peace! As my friend Jill Duffield has said, in Luke’s gospel account of Jesus’ triumphal entry, “Not even the stones are too thick to get it. All of creation rejoices – even the stones! “Here is the foretaste of what’s ultimately to come, a respite from the slaughter, and weeping, from destruction and death that must be endured for resurrection to happen. The saving work of Christ is hidden in plain sight.” ⁵

⁴ Zechariah 9:9.

⁵ Duffield again.

On this front end of Holy Week, especially in today's world, no one can deny the reality of suffering, evil, violent conflict, and death. However, because we know what happens at the end of this week we are called to point out who Jesus is revealed among the details: Prophet, Lord, Messiah, King, Savior, Prince of Peace! All of those descriptive titles do add up, you know. They add up to Son of God who comes to save us.

According to Yale theologian Miraslav Volf, "In the scriptures, the son is a metaphor for the particular closeness of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, to God and his special status as revealer of God." Among all the other names we might bestow upon Jesus, Volf says, it is Son of God that gets us closest to the claim that God is Love. "The claim that God is love says more, however, than only that God loves. It names the character of God's being, not merely the nature of God's activity."⁶ So here on the first day of Holy Week, the full extent to which God loves us begins to be revealed in the person of Jesus, God's Son.

Last weekend Larry and I were in New Orleans. It was a trip planned long before we knew the Final Four would attract crowds of basketball fans, a veritable sea of shades of blue filling the streets, and there toward the end of Lent, countless people adorned with Mardi Gras beads around their necks strung with little basketballs among the beads. While we were there, we took half a day to tour the expansive World War Two Museum, a venture that could last for days to absorb it all.

At any given time that museum is a profound reminder of the grave sacrifices made fighting against cruel and evil autocracies for basic human freedoms around the world. To visit the World War Two Museum today, during the invasion and brutal war in Ukraine with the unfolding revelations of civilians slaughtered is haunting. There is a story from that war which resonates with both today's agonizing plight in Ukraine and today's scripture.

⁶ Miraslav Volf, "God is Love," Christian Century, 11/2/10.

During the war, a young Jewish child had been rescued and hidden in a home in the Netherlands. When he grew up, he was perplexed by the question: What made those people do that? Why did they risk their own safety, risk their own lives to save him and his life from the evil slaughter of the Holocaust? Grappling to understand the why of it, much later in life he went back and interviewed a number of people who had rescued children under those dire and frightful circumstances.

He had thought, was the source of such bravery religious? No, his conversations revealed, it was not purely religious. Some people who saved those children acted out of a sense of faith, but many, many others did not. Was it political? No, it was not political. Some of them leaned left, some leaned right, and others didn't think of themselves as politically motivated at all. So, what was it? he asked over and over again in his interviews to understand why he was saved? Finally, he came to this common finding and conclusion of why those good people risked their lives to save another. To have done otherwise would have violated their understanding of their identity.⁷

To have chosen to help would have violated who they were. They knew who they were. In the face of evil and unbearable suffering they did what they could to save, perfect strangers, children, people at risk. Friends, we will always be left perplexed with the question *Who is Jesus?*

Over these last weeks we have seen he is fully human, fully God, Merciful Savior, and Mother Hen. He is Storyteller and Good Teacher. And today his bold and highly symbolic entry into Jerusalem declares him Prophet, Lord, Messiah, King, Savior, Prince of Peace!

Clearly not even this amazing multitude of titles will capture his identity fully.

⁷ Ezra Klein interview of Margaret Atwood who tells this story from a book she had read, NYT, 3/25/22.

The good news for us is that Jesus knows who he is – the Son of God. And he leaves in the cloak-strewn path the way for us to know him better, which is, of course, to follow him in the way of God’s love and to discover through him the things that make for peace.

AMEN.