

I am...

Menno Mennonite Church

April 2, 2023

Purpose: To examine how Jesus' statements about who he is shaped his life to bring him to Jerusalem.

Message: The shape of Jesus' identity brings him, by his nature, into the conflict of holy week.

Scriptures: Matthew 21:1-11 [I will read], Isaiah 50:4-9a (Please read)

Synopsis: All along the path leading to Jerusalem Jesus has been speaking about identity, both his and what it means to be human. Jesus has been pointing to a new way of being human, and a new way of relating to God. And this sense of identity brings both the promise of new hope and new birth, as well as the threat that this would be misunderstood. The question of who do you say that I am lays at the center of the drama now unfolding.

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Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem
and had reached Bethphage,
at the Mount of Olives,

Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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.

³ If anyone says anything to you,
just say this, 'The Lord needs them.'

And he will send them immediately. "

⁴ This 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."

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;
⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt,
and put their cloaks on them,
and he sat on them.

⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road,
and others cut branches from the trees
and spread them on the road.

⁹ 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!"

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem,
the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"

¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

One of the experiences we have lost with the advent of ubiquitous digital photography is the sense of the flash. Our phones are able to collect light for a couple of seconds and work some algorithmic magic to render a dark picture clear and presentable. But I am guessing we remember when it was not always that way. Dad, long and aficionado of photography would take his full time to setup the shot—getting the lighting just so, the exposure right, and long past when we have started chanting through smiling, gritted teeth “Just take the Shot” the flash would fire, cause us all to blink and we would have to start all over again. Of course those shots were always our favorites knowing how much they took in time effort only to end up with something a little off center and blinky—not quite right and well less than we had hoped. Better still was borrowing the flash to take into the dark and get those freeze frames that left everyone groaning and looking like a deer in the headlights after. Somehow they forgot to engineer that in so we could enjoy that sort of disconcerting of balance experience of having endured the flash.

I think that is a good analogy for what we are working with in our ever so familiar story for this morning. It is easy to think of this as Jesus’ red carpet experience as he processes into Jerusalem for the final experiences of his life in ministry. He comes and presents himself and the crowd goes wild acclaiming him at the top of his lungs. Were this the modern world it doesn’t take a great leap to hear the shutters fluttering away to record the scene and the flash bulbs going off. Each one would be its own bolt-of-lightening in a bottle, freezing a moment in time, catching the subject in one way or another that can be startling, striking, and almost entirely open to interpretation for what they have captured of the scene. Here is the one proclaimed as king, processing as one of power, yet riding the humblest of animals, a young colt of a donkey, perhaps even holding his feet up to make sure that they don’t drag. His entourage proclaim him, and the city is astir wondering only one thing: who is this, anyway?

This question of who is this is likely the most important question asked on this first procession. Matthew reports that the whole city is alive with it at the time. The answer is even more important as it is answered: this is Jesus. Yet this explanation yields just as many snapshots as any other. Matthew establishes him as the true son of Israel and David from the very first, and reiterates that now. But that is far from all.

Who is Jesus? The Angel of the Lord tells Joseph that his fiancé is carrying a son who will save his people from their sins, knowing him as a savior.

Who is Jesus? Matthew reports that Jesus went through Galilee teaching in the synagogues and towns, preaching the good news of a kingdom coming. He heals the sick and amazes the many with his ability to provide beyond expectation.

Who is Jesus? He is the central teacher of the sermon on the mount and the other deep stories of the gospels setting up the way of Christ that would come after him.

In Matthew 16 Jesus actually asks who people think he is. When his disciples report that people offer all sorts of wrong answers, Jesus turns to them and asks them, “But ... who do you say that I am?” “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Peter, always quick with a reply, answers. Who, then, is this Jesus? He is the Messiah, an identity he orders his disciples not to speak of.

Who is Jesus? He is a fulfillment of Prophecy. Jesus’ riding on the colt was referencing Zechariah and his declaration of a coming king on an unusual mount. He is the one who the prophets point to. The snapshots go on: miracle worker, trouble maker, king, jester, pest. It is all there in the flashes, each one startling, each one capturing something of the truth, but only a piece. By the end of the week, we know, he will fulfill the role of liberator for all, but it will not, can not be the liberation that the crowds longed for and expected of him. Good Friday’s shouts of ‘crucify him’ may well outpace Palm Sunday’s precisely because so few understood the truer answer to the question of who this Jesus is. As their image and the one that developed before them diverged what other outcome could there be? Reading as we do with the advantage of familiarity, hindsight and 2000 years of intervening consideration, it is easy for us to say that we would have gotten the picture right and clear, that we would have found a way to be in the right camp and say the right things. Yet it is precisely how we answer this question that finds a way to shape whether Jesus comforts or disappoints us, frustrates or encourages us, in what measure and when.

Those who answer “who is Jesus” by identifying him as a political ideologue who simply backs and proclaims a program of power will be disappointed, no matter the thread. While the rule of the Kingdom does have practical implications on how we live and what we ought to do, Jesus does not prescribe a system of governance that will solve all things or fit any manifesto, with his followers having to regularly endure the unjust systems of this world for the faithfulness to the next.

When we answer that Jesus is a kind handy man who fixes all our problems and makes things better we will too be disappointed. While Jesus heals our many ills by inviting us into the hard work of reconciliation, Jesus does not by simple invocation fix marriages, reunite estranged families, grant many friendships or make life simply easy as a balm for all things. Jesus' rule has economic implications, but being a follower does not guarantee good pensions, easy comfort or high market returns. Those who answer Who is Jesus with a "he heals us from all diseases and all times" will also find themselves disappointed. Healing comes from God in all its forms, even those that we don't fully know or fully understand. God does not yet fill the promise of ending all illness, and there are enemies yet to be defeated.

We can go on. Whatever our flash snapshot might be, it is only that: the sippet of one aspect, one image of the infinite God and the savior who came to reconcile us to the living God once and for all. Jesus is the one who accepted the mission from God to save all people from their sins by living, dying, and being raised again by the God who loved the world so much that he saves the world not by power but by sacrifice. Jesus buys us wholly in his death and resurrection and in doing so invites us into the way of God that does not blink or turn aside from even the ugliest elements of human kind that is so readily on display in this week of passion, of suffering, but rather rises again to remind us that even this knows its limits in the most high. We are invited to a following that far exceeds the waving of palm branches and singing of hallelujahs, though there is always time and need for that, but that invites us into a faith that calls us to risk much to bear witness to the fullness of God and knowing our savior.

Who is Jesus? He is our Savior. All of him. All of his life. All of his death. All of his resurrection save us and call us to follow on behind. Palm Sunday is the perfect opportunity to name this even as we also name all of the snapshot Jesus' that we would hold up and try to place on the donkey instead. What is marvelous about Jesus is that he defies every last attempt that we would offer to try to pin him down to be only the singular savior that we would prefer—you can pick from the whole salad bar of partials Jesus of which I have only named a few—and comes to be the savior that we need. The savior who was sent to reconcile us to God, who does not turn away from the fullness of sin and imperfection, but comes and suffers the worst of human cruelty to build a bridge to the other side. Jesus is the one who God sends to liberate us from the very bonds of hell itself, and that is what makes this passion week holy. That is what we must always

cling to when we look to Jesus—the one who is beyond our expectations, calling us always to follow too. This is the savior we need and the one we must declare.

Knowing and proclaiming our savior is important because there are always saviors on offer. There are always those who would offer a way of grace and ease to deliver us to where we would rather be. Sometimes we reinterpret the Jesus we want and supplant the Jesus that we have, forgetting that the flash impression, as startling and compelling as it may be, is only that—an image and imitation; nothing more. Sometimes we are given to forgetting that who Jesus is not just then but also in our lives and our living can lead us down the a road of much trouble. We must always allow the whole of Christ to be the lens through which we consider other prospects, other promises, and nothing more.

The profession of this identity does not, of itself, save anyone. But it is the beginning of the relationship that will change our lives as long as we shall lead them, and shall in the fullness of time, change the world. That is what we know, what we hold, and what we must follow in this holy week and every day forever more.

Amen