

10-11 #

The True Messiah's Arrival

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying 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. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." ⁴This 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." ⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The 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!" ¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

We just had a Seder meal where at one point we were to open the door for Elijah to come in with the hope that he would be heralding the coming Messiah. It is particularly interesting for me that we have been studying the Jewish Passover these past three weeks. I have often felt that in order to understand Jesus better, I really needed to understand his faith background more. Because Christianity has a tendency to adapt itself to the cultures that surround it and finding the real historical Jesus gets harder and harder.

One of the first books that really thrilled me in college was Albert Schweitzer's book, written in 1905, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus." According to Wikipedia: "In *The Quest*, Schweitzer reviewed all prior work on the question of the 'historical Jesus' starting with the late 18th century. He pointed out how Jesus' image had changed with the times and with the personal proclivities of the various authors. He concluded with his own synopsis and interpretation of what had been learned over the course of the previous century. He took the position that the life of Jesus must be interpreted in the light of Jesus' own convictions, which he characterized as those of 'late Jewish eschatology.'"

So what insights did we receive from our Seder experience?

One insight that I grew even more aware of was the numerous conflicts that the Jews have had to overcome in their long history. It is no wonder they long for the old days when they were in Jerusalem and in power. It seems that was the only time when they truly felt safe. And even though they are in Jerusalem now, they still don't feel safe. Perhaps that reinforces all the more the desire for a strong powerful Messiah to come to their rescue, to protect them and prove to the world that their God is the most powerful God.

Which brings me to another observation I had – at one point towards the end of the ritual meal a door is opened and Elijah is invited in to drink from his cup and to foretell the hope of the coming of the Messiah, keeping the hopes of the Jewish people alive over thousands of years. I found myself understanding all the more how the early followers of Jesus felt when they came to trust that awareness inside of them that Jesus was the Messiah. What a joy! What a relief! What new hope – power without having to be in one place and not having to be IN power. The power of this Messiah was open and universal – forgiving and enriching.

These observations and many more large and small bring us today to the meaning of Palm Sunday.

Jesus and his followers were traveling to the holy land in order to join all the other Jews in a celebration of the Passover. This time seems to define what it means to be Jewish. It means, "we are special because God has protected us through all these years and all these tragedies and we have survived." Passover holds them together in their identity, it creates a strong bond. I am reminded of the TV series "House" where Dr. House meets the mother of his girlfriend at the time, Cuddy and she asks him if he would consider converting to Judaism. To which Cuddy responds, "House is atheist, Mom." And the Mother responds, "So what! Half the Jews I know are atheists – it's about community!"

So Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and he knows there is this great expectation of him. His reputation has preceded him and all those following along with him also have high expectations. Jesus has to plan this grand entrance very carefully because his entire ministry has been leading up to this moment – the moment of the true Messiah's arrival into the Holy land which has been the Jewish people's hope for over 700 years!

What kind of a Messiah is he?

Well, looking back over how he has been up to this point, no one should really be surprised that he chose to enter on a modest animal as a peaceful soul. Up to this point he hung around the modest and the meek – those who needed mercy, healing and grace – the poor, afflicted - those struggling with their lives. The great Jewish leaders who had been focusing so much of their life's energies on making sure all the aspects of their lives were so ordered so that they would never been outcaste; whose greatest concern was how to get more power; these people Jesus told clearly that they did not need him.

Jesus was obviously living and teaching a life that was something that those who separated themselves from the poor and the afflicted, albeit not without compassion, but those who separated humanity in their minds, were not able to comprehend in what Jesus was living and teaching.

Jesus was trying to show humanity that God does not want to be separated from each and every one of them, so why should we do it amongst ourselves? Christ's message was clearly, "I represent God – and nothing can separate humanity from God unless they chose to." All people belong to God; all we have to do is to recognize the God of mercy, equality, justice and peace which could be developing in every human being.

The sense of safety and protection is not limited to any one group according to whether or not certain rituals are performed perfectly and one has been blessed not to have any illnesses, or be a woman. Women were considered impure for about a week each month pretty much between the ages of 10 and 50. But we made up for it the rest of the month!

What has been reinforced to me lately as a result of being on an interfaith panel at the Frederick Community College is that so many world religions have been persecuted because they were different from what was considered normal by the people in political power. And this persecution has helped them to form a strong identity to separate themselves from others, almost as if they could never forgive those who had persecuted them. Their identity has been formed all more strongly – perhaps as a form of protection - as a separate entity from those outside of their faith.

And here we have Jesus – an outcaste from some leaders of the faith he was born into; knowingly riding into the Holy City as a Messiah for the other outcasts. Here is a Messiah who preaches "love your enemies as yourself." His willingness to show his power by going through the pain and suffering so he can reinforce to others that they are not powerless, they are not losers! If you have love and forgiveness, you have a power that is beyond those who focused their salvation purely on being greater than others.

Rev. James Mueller wrote, "Forgiveness is painful. It's a lot easier to forgive people that are close to you. One of the greatest challenges Jesus ever poses to the Christian is love for your enemy. You are choosing to let your enemy go without hurting him with angry words. That's why Palm Sunday is more than waving branches and singing hosannas. It shows me a God who loves me and all of us enough to take the journey through Jerusalem. It shows me a God that makes *forgiveness* his primary weapon. So, like the prophets of old remind yourself of that Messianic promise, bind to your hearts, and prepare for the Son of God, who comes to take away the sins of the world . . .

That's the Messianic promise. You're tired of your enemies always getting the upper hand. You're tired of sin trapping you in life. You're tired of looking back with regret. Well here comes life, and love, and forgiveness marching through Jerusalem's gates. The Son of David is here . . . Forgiveness is one of the hardest things we will ever do. But it shocks people when we give up ourselves, the revenge or repayment that is rightfully ours. To take someone's sins and throw them onto the bottom of the ocean floor where they are lost forever. To forgive as we've been forgiven. When we do that, it changes what people think about Christians, it changes what they think about God. It lets them see a tiny glimmer of God's incredible love in a world that is so unforgiving. The world is so unforgiving! That's why forgiveness changes the world! We can show them God's love. "

Have you ever noticed how we have not continued this very important ritual in our tradition?

Christ is the sacrificial Lamb that saves God's people. Jesus replaces the Passover experience in giving hope. Christ is the Pesach and he replaces this ritual as a constant reminder of God's unlimited Love. During the Seder meal this morning I was supposed to spill one drop of wine for each of the 10 plagues bestowed upon the Egyptians which lead to their eventual release. We, instead have Christ's blood spilled in stead of wine. Forgiveness and reconciliation is the fruit of Christ's labors, and that is the glorious difference that Palm Sunday brings.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN