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First Christian Church  
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## In the Name Of...

John 12:12-15 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord- the King of Israel!" 14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15 "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

Luke 20:21-25 So they asked [Jesus], "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. 22 Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" 23 But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, 24 "Show me a denarius. Whose image and name does it bear?" They said, "Caesar's." 25 He said to them, "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and give to God the things that are God's."

Have you ever had the experience of hearing a word or phrase that you've heard for years and yet all of a sudden that word or phrase sounds funny? A few months ago, I was watching the evening news on TV, and it suddenly struck me that that newscast ended in the same way as most of the newscasts I've ever heard, with the anchorperson signing off with something like the following phrase: *"And now, on behalf of Joe and Mary, I'm Bill, wishing you a pleasant good evening."* Now, I'll bet that you too have heard that phrase, or something like it, a thousand times before, but for some reason all of a sudden **this** time it struck me funny. For think about it; say it slowly: **"On behalf of Joe and Mary, I'm Bill."**

Now why *is* it that he is who his is on their behalf? Would he not be who he is if they weren't there for him to be who he is on their behalf? During the commercial break, did Joe and Mary suddenly take a sabbatical from their existence so that Bill has to do triple duty, being not only himself but them too? The phrase becomes a little silly-sounding, doesn't it, if you start analyzing it! What could it possibly mean to be

somebody on somebody else's behalf? It has come to be a polite and professional sounding phrase, "on behalf of," but its meaning does tend to evaporate when you look at it closely.

Now obviously nothing very important hangs on the solution of this little puzzle. It's simply one of those phrases, one of those idioms, of our language that function as a sort of social lubricant. It's like "Have a nice day" or "How are you? Fine" -- little phrases that are sort of like the WD-40 of life and which allow the world to move along a little more smoothly. But sometimes there is more at stake in the way that we talk and the words that we use. And in the language of *faith*, there are some things that we say that are worth looking at more closely. Things that you and I may have said all our lives. One of those puzzling little phrases is "in the name of." We often conclude our prayers "in Christ's name." There are countless hymns that speak of the "name of Jesus." Our Palm Sunday scripture this morning telling of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem says that the crowd cried out "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

What's with this "name" business? That question sent me to studying what names meant for the ancient Hebrews and for the early Christians and even in more recent history. And I found out three things: First of all, historically, a name might signify a person's occupation or work. In fact, a good many of our English surnames got their start in that way when, a few hundred years ago, it became increasingly important to identify people more precisely. That's why we have people whose last name is Carpenter or Mason or Miller. Before those were proper names, they were occupations, which let you distinguish one person from another which let you distinguish Edward the carpenter from Edward the shepherd.

A second feature about names, especially in Biblical times, was that names told who you were, who you belonged to, who you were kin to. "Simon bar Jonah" means "Simon, who is Jonah's son." That, of course, is the same way we get our modern English surname "Johnson." So, in this way, names can establish your place, they tell of your roots, your history; they tie you to a whole network of others, both past and future. But names in biblical time also had a third, and extremely important, aspect to them. *To know someone's name was to have power over him or her.* Now we may well chuckle at such a quaint idea -- but there's more truth here than we might realize -- even today. For sometimes being able to name something does give us a certain power over that thing. Who among you has not found yourself possessed at some time by an anxiety or a worry that nagged at you, but which you couldn't quite put your finger on. And then, when you finally realized exactly **what** you were worrying about, when you were able to put a name to it, then the worry seemed much less fearsome, much less troubling. It's sometimes easier to face something when that something has a name.

And this idea that knowing someone's name gives you power over them is also right on the mark in another way. For when you know what someone values, when you know what someone thinks is really important; when you know what someone fears, when you know their hopes and their dreams -- then, indeed, you do know how to make them answer to you, you know, in effect, how to call them by name. Advertisers know this -- they are able to sell us billions of dollars worth of things in a year to make us more beautiful, younger looking, more attractive, thinner, sexier, smelling better because they know that many of us secretly answer to the name of *Insecure* or *Vain*. They call us by our name and we respond. Advertisers spend lots of money finding out our secret

names, so that they can make us answer.

When you think about it in this way, every single one of us does in fact have a variety of names which we respond to -- names that deep down tell us who we are what we value, what we fear, what we hope, what we dream. These, too, are our names -- whether we answer to them proudly, or whether they are ones which we hope nobody knows. Our names, whether our public names or our secret names, carry with them a whole set of assumptions about who we are, what we expect out of life, what we are hoping for -- and the same is the case for those names that we confer on other people.

And that is in fact the key to understanding not only our scripture for this morning, but for understanding the most persistent and tragic puzzle of Holy Week: how could those same crowds who were so ecstatically and enthusiastically greeting Jesus "in the name of the Lord" on Sunday become the mob who on Thursday and Friday jeered Jesus and demanded his death, screaming "Crucify Him!"? You see, when these folks hailed Jesus as the Messiah, as the One coming "*in the name* of God," we realize now -- with the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight -- that they were making the wrong assumptions about God. And while I can't really blame them for this -- after all, they had suffered under the very real tyranny and terror of the Roman occupation government and its armies and oh-so-wanted sometimes to exact revenge -- it is nonetheless the case that time and time again Jesus didn't answer to the name that people pinned on him, didn't simply confirm people's wants but instead surprised them with news about God that they may not always have wanted to hear.

What do I mean? Well, consider this example: In the last twenty years or so, strategic planning and the creation of mission statements for corporations of every size

has been all the rage. And many, many of those mission statements end up talking about how the goal of the organization is to “meet the needs of the customer,” right? Now, at this point we could draw a few obvious parallels with the role of the church, couldn’t we? But my friends, we must be very careful here, for ***this is precisely the point at which the notion of the church being a place to meet your needs breaks down*** - and SHOULD break down! Why? Well, a corporation that is in the business of selling you stuff in order to meet your needs doesn’t really much care about whether they are needs that you **SHOULD** have or not. Target, or K-Mart or Walgreens doesn’t really care if your “needs” is to buy eight pounds of M&M’s and binge the afternoon away; if your secret name is “glutton” the store is not going to confront you on whether that is a name you should be answering to. No, the store is simply there to “meet your needs” *however* you have identified them. But that is NOT the mission of the church. Jesus never said for us to go and meet people’s needs whatever they think they are; no, what His ministry was about was always trying to help ***to define and form and shape*** what ***authentic*** human needs are ***supposed*** to be in light of a God of unconditional grace and love. Do you hear the difference? Because think about it: the “needs” that so many of us might have (left to our own sometimes sinful devices) to live our lives unaware of the claims of God’s other creatures, to amass more and more “stuff,” to ignore or even dismiss certain kinds of people — none of these are “needs” that the church should ever be in the business of seeking to meet. All of these supposed “needs” — and many, many more — must be re-formed and re-shaped in light of the Gospel of unconditional love. That is the God whom Jesus represents and who those Palm Sunday spectators did not “get.”

In fact, have to think that as those onlookers on that first Palm Sunday watched Jesus' entry they must have thought, "Why, this is **certainly not what I was expecting....!**" After all, warrior king, a royal revolutionary ready to rout the Romans, would ride into town on a mighty war horse, or on a powerful chariot. But no, Jesus rides into town sitting on a donkey. A **donkey!** This would have puzzled those crowds. Why? Well, in the ancient near east, when the king of a country visited another country and arrived on a donkey, it was an understood symbol that he was arriving as a supplicant. But that's not the kind of king that those lining that roadway wanted, that's not the name they wanted to hear. When they shouted "Hosanna!" – which means "Save us!" – they **meant** *"Save us from the hated Romans. Run them out. Give them at taste of the same medicine they have been force-feeding us!"* But that isn't the Jesus that they got. And this dashing of what they expected is finally one of the reasons that the same crowd that started out so **adoringly** on Sunday could five days later be screaming in Governor Pilate's courtyard for Jesus to die.

The Palm Sunday story, then, asks us to ask ourselves: what **do** we expect of God? What **do** we expect of Jesus? What name do we want Jesus, want God, to bear? For you see, sometimes, if we're honest,

- We may expect God's name to be "magician," a kind of cosmic air traffic controller keeping our lives always on course and always in smooth air.
- We may expect a God who looks like us and sounds like us, who hates, as writer Annie Lamot says, everything that we hate, a God whom we can call upon to curse those whom we curse
- We may expect a God whose name evokes the the power of a potentate

instead of a God of gentle and persuasive power.

- We may expect a God who loves **us** just a little bit more than He does all those “others” – foreigners and immigrants, the neighbor we can’t stand, the politician we loathe.
- We may expect a God who will cozy up to us and bless – or at least look the other way at – our bigotries and biases.
- We may expect a God who really does like our political party better, our nation better, our race or color or class or orientation better, instead of a God who has told us time and time again that He loves each and every creature he has made with equal fervor.
- We may expect a God, a Savior, who treats us as we deserve to be treated – and so we oscillate between being proud of our achievements and having the bejeebers scared out of us because we know how very undeserving of grace we can be sometimes of grace.

We may expect a Savior who gives us what we want, instead of One who knows what we TRULY need.

The crowds that lined that road into Jerusalem so long ago likely left the parade saying “**well, that certainly was not what we were expecting...**” But even if they didn’t quite receive what they were expecting, even if their “Hosanas” didn’t in fact foretell of a Savior who would conquer the Romans by force, even if this King came almost comically on a donkey instead of riding in a chariot – well, what they received instead was a Savior whose name is one that bespeaks passionate, persistent, unconditional love unbounded, when we deserve it and when we don’t. They – and we – have received a

Savior who will never get tired of us, will always walk with us, who will always be present with us to offer the best that is possible, who will comfort and care, challenge and chide, carry and console. No matter what. No matter what. And with that understanding, we can indeed say “Hosanna! Blessed IS the One who comes in the name of such a God!”  
Amen.