

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Surprised By....

(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."

How many of you remember the movie "Jaws"? Do you remember how, when things got scary, when a character was about to get attacked, how the music began almost imperceptibly but then begins to swell until the bass notes are just pounding away? duh-Duh-Duh-**DUH**-Duh-**DUH**..... Of course, lots of movies use this particular cliché to signal that there is something dangerous, something worrisome, something ominous about to happen and you want to scream at the character in the movie "Don't do it! Don't go in that door! Don't get in that car!" duh-Duh-Duh-**DUH**-Duh-**DUH**....

The story of Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem at the beginning of the last week of his life really ought to have that music playing in the background. duh-Duh-Duh-**DUH**-Duh-**DUH**.... For, you see, while we have, as more than one Bible commentator puts it,

“domesticated” this story and made it the occasion for our children to do their fun and lovely palm parades, and for soaring songs to be sung – as we did to open our worship this day – the mood, the tone, the import of this story is actually much more ominous indeed. Why is that so?

Well, consider the elements of the story and it may indeed begin to strike you that this is not simply the happy story we usually read it to be. The key to doing so is this: read this story as if you were a Roman observer of what was going on. So, consider these facets of the story

- When Jesus tells his disciples to go find a donkey and bring it to him, to a Roman observer this would have simply looked like Jesus was ordering his followers to break the law and commit theft. With the crowds in Jerusalem swelling at this time of year, the Romans were very nervous about any possible threat to the public safety.
- And when that crowd following Jesus – which to Roman imperial eyes would appear to be more a mob – begins stripping branches from trees to lay down on the road this too seemed to them to be an act of criminal conspiracy and vandalism. For you see, while we use palm branches, in all likelihood the branches that were shorn from their trees were in fact olive branches from the neighboring farmer’s field and far from being a charming act of honoring Jesus, the stripping of those branches likely imperiled the olive tree farmer’s ability to feed his family that year since he now had nothing to sell at harvest time.
- And when the crowd – this mob, from the Roman point of view – begins

honoring Jesus by shouting Hosana! as Jesus rode that donkey, the Romans were probably convinced that they had a full-scale revolution about to occur. Virtually no Jews of the day, particularly ones from the rural areas coming into Jerusalem for Passover would have owned donkeys for *riding*. Most farming was done back-breakingly by hand. Riding – much less riding at the head of a procession with a crowd singing your praises – was the way that high Roman officials traveled and now this Jesus fellow seemed to be acting just like Caesar and his representatives.

- And then there is that next-to-the last verse, “The whole city was in turmoil.” Occupiers do not like to see the people they are occupying “in turmoil”; it makes them very nervous.

Do you begin to see why this is indeed not just a simple and happy story, but a complex and ominous one?

So, what shall we say about this story when looked at this way? I think it's very ominousness can help us actually be surprised by what we find there, what it teaches us about the nature of God and the nature of the Savior whom we follow. How so? Well, let's start with a principle I've shared with you before: any Bible text usually tells us both something about both God and something about ourselves. Or, to use a metaphor I like, every scripture can be both a lens and a mirror. We use a lens to see that which is, on first view, perhaps difficult to see clearly and we use a mirror to be able to see things that sometimes we can see in no other way, things about ourselves. So what does this story of Jesus' triumphal yet ominous entry into Jerusalem tell us? In what way is the story a lens allowing us to see God more clearly and also a mirror that

allows us to see the truth about ourselves more clearly?

When we turn our lens on the story, we see, I believe, two things about God: First, of all the scriptures that Matthew could have quoted on this occasion he chooses what might seem to be a rather obscure passage from the prophet Zechariah in order to talk about Jesus; did you hear it? *“Here is your King, coming to you in humility.”* Or, as some translations have it, *“Here is your King, coming to you in gentleness.”* That’s what Matthew quotes in order to explain who Jesus is. But listen to what the passage in Zechariah goes on to say, which Matthew did not quote but which his Jewish readers and hearers would have known: *“[And the King] shall banish the chariots... and the war horses... and the warrior’s bow will be banished and He will speak peaceably to every nation”* (Zech 9:10). So, the first thing is that unlike what the Romans are fearing, Jesus comes representing a God of gentleness and justice and peace, not one of armed insurrection and rebellion, a God of patient and persistent love that would be oh-so-tested during the rest of the week but which, come next Sunday, is shown indeed to be triumphant. Moreover, this is a God who is universal – not a god of a particular class or people or nation or race but a God of all. A God who cares for all and wants justice for all. Not just your God or my God but a God of everyone – even of those whom we may not much like and who we may even wonder why they’re getting the same deal as we are! And that is meant to make us widen our empathies and imaginations, to challenge our bigotries and biases.

And that’s also where this story also becomes a mirror, turned back on us, telling us something about ourselves. For the same crowd that ecstatically and joyously welcomed Jesus on that first Palm Sunday, the same ones that lined that road with

branches to honor him with such delight and abandon are also the same ones who five days later were demanding His death, who loudly claimed to prefer releasing a career thief – Barabas – to setting free Jesus from that Roman jail, who would soon line the very same road jeering while Jesus carried the cross on which he was to die. Why the astounding and swift change in their attitude? Well, as you read the story of Jesus' last week of earthly life you see that the people had profoundly misunderstood him and – just like you or I, sometimes, when faced with our own misunderstandings – lashed back with defensiveness and anger. For, again, when you read the accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and you read of the behavior of that crowd, you realize that what you are seeing are folks who were in fact intending to greet a conquering hero, you are seeing folks whom the Romans rightly had reason to fear. For the people lining that road shouting "*Hosanna*" thought that finally, finally the Messiah was coming to put everything aright. Finally, God had come to bring a mighty army to wrest the land back from the Romans and to defeat them in battle. Finally, God had sent Jesus, a new David, to be the new King, the new warrior who would rout the hated Romans.

Yet they got surprised, didn't they, and with that surprise came the anger that so quickly, five days later, turned on Jesus. Because it turns out that this new Savior, this new King, met none of the job description of King that they had assumed. This was a new kind of King with a new kind of Kingdom. A King that represented a God of gentleness and justice for all, a God of infinitely patient and loving persuasion, not of force of arms. For Jesus sits absolutely silently on that donkey in that process, surrounded by those who thought this was the battle march of the new David. But the King was not that sort of King; he was a savior that they did not expect. And so they

got surprised. This was not at all what so many of them had expected, this was not the way that God was “supposed” to deal with them.

And thus the mirror that is this story has something to show us to. Because this is perhaps the hardest lesson that Jesus has to teach us: That God loves everyone. God loves even those folks whom we may find difficult to love. God loves even those folks whom we do not want to love. God loves those folks who don't love me and never will. There are times, indeed, that I find this teaching terribly, terribly hard. It seems, even, terribly, terribly wrong. How could God possibly love some folks who do terribly wrong or evil things? It's a question I suspect we are asking this week as we hear with horror about pilots crashing airliners and mothers killing their babies and people celebrating bigotry. Part of the answer is that we always have to distinguish between what pleases God and what God loves. Hear that again: we have to distinguish between what pleases God and what God loves. I have no doubt that God is horrified and that God's heart breaks and that God is angry with those ones who would commit terrible acts against their fellow humans – especially when they do it in God's name. To say that God is a God who loves everyone is not to say that God is not also a God of justice. Which means that God – as so much of the scripture indeed records – does indeed show anger against those who would deny that love. I think that it is even safe to say that even God may find it hard to like some of those folks whom He nonetheless loves!

But the story of Palm Sunday and the story of Holy Week teaches us that it is not about who we like, who we care for – or even about who God likes and enjoys. It is the story of the possibility of love that is for everyone, that transcends what is “supposed” to

be, that will win out in the end, and which cannot be defeated even by death on a cross. It is the story of the possibility of bringing good out of evil instead of responding to evil with more hate. It is a story that continues to constantly and wonderfully surprise us, and for that – even when we find it hard to say and hard to understand – thanks be to God. Amen.