

"Who Is This?"

Matthew 21:9-11

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday

And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is This?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

In the 1969 movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Paul Newman as Butch and Robert Redford as the Sundance Kid (whom, I understand, spent some time in Fort Benton) played the parts of two famous Western outlaws as they went on a robbing spree in the middle of the nineteenth century. When one of the bank owners grew tired of being robbed and hired some famous lawmen as a posse to capture them, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid think they will easily give them the slip, but they failed again and again. No matter where they went or what they did to get away, the posse was always right there behind them, but they could never quite see who they were being chased by. So, throughout that part of the movie, Butch and the Kid would keep stopping, looking back, and saying, "Who are these guys?"

A similar question came up on Palm Sunday. The city of Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims who had come for Passover. There was excitement in the air. Then, all of a sudden, a parade entered the city with people shouting, singing, and waving palm branches. Someone important must be coming, the people thought. Our text says, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up and asked, 'Who is this?'"

People had different answers for that question. Many people who had witnessed Jesus' three-year mission, had seen the many miracles, and heard the powerful preaching, believed Jesus to be the Messiah – the Son of David. With such power and such authority, the people hoped against hope that Jesus could be the one to rescue them. As these people flooded into Jerusalem, they cried out "Hosanna!" which means "Save us!" These people viewed Jesus as a political Savior who would reveal His power and might in Jerusalem that week, raise up an army, cast out the hated Romans, establish His kingdom on earth, and bring Israel back to the glory days of David and Solomon.

The religious establishment of the day had a decidedly different answer to the question of Jesus' identity. According to the account in Luke, when the crowds were hailing Jesus as Messiah, the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" They saw Jesus, not as the Messiah, but a mere teacher who had been challenging their authority for the past three years. They saw Jesus as an unorthodox rabbi proclaiming false doctrine and a nuisance who was getting in their way constantly and had to be eliminated, even if it meant killing Him.

Others in the crowd had a more mediating position. While they didn't think Jesus was the religious danger that the Pharisees made them out to be, they were perhaps not willing to hail him as the Messiah. So when asked who Jesus is, they answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

All three of these assessments of Jesus' identity were wrong and those who held them were disappointed. Jesus did not come to be a political or military Messiah to free them from the Romans. Five days later, he would be hanging dead on a cross. Imagine the disappointment of the crowds who went from the tremendous high of Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem to His miserable death on the cross!

Jesus was also not a mere teacher, as the Pharisees thought, but His death on the cross would not satisfy them because Jesus would not go away. He would rise from the grave three days later. Imagine their disappointment when they heard the reports of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

And Jesus was not a prophet, certainly not just a prophet, is the people believed Him to be. We read our text and think that these people got it right, but they didn't. They miss the mark like all of the other people. Although Jesus is a prophet, He is so much more. And, although Jesus did come to declare God's Word, He came to do so much more.

As wrong as those views about Jesus' identity were, they still prevail today, maybe even among you. Do you view Jesus as some sort of earthly Savior? We hear lots of talk today in

Christian publications and on radio and television stations about "Jesus is Lord!" Preachers proclaim that God wants you to be happy, healthy and wealthy...if you have enough faith. Do you see Jesus as someone who will ride into your life, free you from all of the problems and disappointments of life, and cause you to be always happy?

Or, perhaps is your view of Jesus' identity more along the lines of the Pharisees? Is Jesus a difficult to accept teacher or just a nuisance -- someone who gets in the way of things that you really want to do? When you view the teachings of Jesus and how you live your life or how you want to live your life, do those teachings just in the way? Would you just like Him to go away?

Or, maybe you view Jesus as a prophet -- a well-respected religious spokesman. Perhaps, you think, that Jesus has something profound to say, like any prophet would. However, do you only give lip service to Jesus' words, while still holding the worldview of the people in this world as you try to get along with?

If any of these views occupy your minds, then you will be disappointed just like those who held them on that first Palm Sunday. Jesus will not take away all your problems and make you happy, healthy, and wealthy just because you believe in Him. Nor will Jesus just go away because he interferes with your lifestyle or makes you feel uncomfortable. He has promised to return as Judge to scrutinize all of our thoughts, words, and deeds and to give us what these things merit. Nor will Jesus be satisfied to simply be a prophet. He is so much more and He came to do so much more.

We need a correct answer to the question the people in Jerusalem asked, "Who is this?" The people should have known the answer because the prophet Zechariah had prophesied of this day long before and revealed Jesus' true identity. Zechariah had written, "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O Daughter of Jerusalem! behold your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zech. 9:9)

Jesus comes as Messiah and King, but not the kind of Messiah or King that was expected back then or even now. He comes, not in pride and might, but in humility and weakness. He comes, not to rule over His people and be served by them, but to serve His people and to give up His life for them.

This seems so odd and contrary to what we think a king should do. A king should conquer, shouldn't he? This King did come to conquer, but not what the people thought. He did not come to conquer military foes, physical suffering, or poverty. He came to conquer much more.

Imagine a doctor who would only give out painkillers for someone suffering from a brain tumor. It would be the easy thing to do and might ease the pain for a while, but it would not cure the disease. For the pain is only the symptom. The tumor is the problem. The tough solution to this problem is surgery to remove the tumor. If the tumor - the root to the problem -- is removed then the pain will be forever gone, too. All of us would want a doctor who treats the problem and not merely the symptoms.

That is what we have in our Messiah Jesus. He did not come merely to redress injustice in our world, cure sicknesses, and relieve hunger and poverty. These are indeed serious problems, but they are only the symptoms of a deeper problem. If Jesus had come into Jerusalem that day and set up an earthly kingdom, He might have been able to relieve some of those symptoms for a select group of people living in that land and at that time. But others outside of that geographical area and that period of time (like us, for example) would be stuck. Jesus, however, came to tackle the source of that problem -- sin -- which has not only corrupted our relationship with God, but has also corrupted our relationship with each other, as well as our life on this planet.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday specifically and intentionally to take that sin on Himself and pay the price to wipe that sin away. No king's palace or earthly treasure could pay the price for even one of your sins. The sinless Son of God came to pay with His own life which He freely and lovingly gave up for you on the cross five days after this triumphant entry into Jerusalem. There is no prophet who was ever capable of doing that

By His lowly death as servant, rather than by a triumphant reign as king, the power of sin to corrupt, condemn, and send you to hell has been removed. Your account with God is wiped clean.

Your relationship with Him has been restored. Sure, not all of the symptoms of sin have been removed. You still live in a world corrupted by sin. There will still be hardships and miseries that you will have to endure. In fact, Jesus calls us to follow Him and to expect even more difficulties as we do as Satan tries to shatter our confidence in Him.

However, these need not worry us. It's like going to the doctor and being told that you have no disease but only some relatively harmless symptoms. If you know that, it is much easier for you to handle than knowing something like cancer is causing those symptoms. My friends, we are living in a time of seemingly difficult "symptoms" surrounding us, but the fatal disease of sin was completely cured when Jesus hung on the cross and said, "It is finished!"

The only glory of this king who rode humbly into Jerusalem on that day occurred on the following Sunday when he exited the tomb alive. He not only showed forth His victory over sin and the result of sin, death, but He also guaranteed similar victory for all who place their trust and their hope in Him. You can rest assured that no marital problem, no family problem, no financial setback, no disease, nothing -- can ultimately overcome you. You are guaranteed a life in heaven free of all those problems. The book of Revelation describes it this way: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev. 21:4-5)

Therefore, don't be disappointed over who Jesus is not, but rather rejoice over who Jesus is. He is far greater than the Pharisees imagined. He has far greater authority than any prophet who ever lived.. He is far more wonderful than the crowds could ever dream. He does not merely teach or solve a few worldly problems. He has conquered the common problem of all mankind - sin - and shown the way to a new life in Him that lasts throughout eternity. So, continue to follow this servant King. Remain in constant contact with Him through His Word. Allow Him to feed you and sustain you with His Holy Supper. And you will receive all the magnificent gifts that He wishes to give you.

Our service began today with a little parade with palm branches like the one on the first Palm Sunday. That can help us to look back on what has happened, but there's more. That palm processional can also help us look forward. In the book of Revelation, John describes the scene in heaven this way: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Rev. 7:9-10) Because of what Jesus, the servant king, accomplished this week, salvation now also belongs to you. See you in that multitude standing before the throne. Don't forget your palm branch. Amen.