

***“Who Is This?”***

***A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan (Palm/Passion 2023)***

***Please Read:  
Matthew 21:1-11  
Matthew 27:11-37***

Every Memorial Day here in New Canaan we have a parade. Our first year it was cancelled because of Covid, but the past two years I’ve enjoyed marching in the parade either with the Rotary or Exchange Club. I’ll never forget last year watching Pat Stoddard boldly walking in the parade with her walking sticks, arms wildly flailing about. Some thought she was a little old for marching in a parade and offered a car for her to ride, but she insisted on walking as far as she could. I’m sure those who didn’t know Pat, a pillar of New Canaan, wondered who is *this* coming down the road??

In our gospel lesson, Matthew records the crowds, as Jesus rides into the city, asking the question: “Who is this?” For all of the rumors and stories about Jesus of Nazareth, even to his most loyal followers, he is an enigmatic hero. But it’s an important question, and I invite you to consider again, “Who is this?” Who is this Jesus for you?

The first crowds were quick to come to a conclusion. “The crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee’” (Mat 21:11). There you have it. Jesus is not a wonderworker of miracles, a successful physician, a rabbi who knows the bible backward and forward. Jesus is a *prophet*, a speaker of the truth of God. The prophets of God invariably spoke for those who could not speak for themselves, naming justice for what it was, calling the rich and powerful to account on the basis of God’s holy law.

Speakers of God’s truth are always in short supply, and no wonder a great crowd had come out to cheer this new prophet. It is always easier for a preacher to go with the flow, to pamper and flatter a congregation rather than to speak the truth. It’s hard to talk about immigration, racism, climate change. Gun violence that leaves children in a pool of blood. Past Presidents indicted by a grand jury. Although I know that I’m supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, most people prefer comfort! Sometimes we preachers lose our prophetic edge because it’s tough to say tough things to people you love. They may not love you anymore!

Sometimes the prophetic word is hard for any of us to hear, because Jesus actually makes demands of us... we will have to change our lives, even lose them, if we hear and heed his call... Sometimes, we just get tired of it all...

“Who is this?” the crowds asked. “Look out, here comes the prophet Jesus!” And yet, even as great as prophets are, they are not enough. Speaking the truth is a great

achievement, and prophets are in short supply. But *doing* the truth is another matter, *being* the truth is a completely different enterprise. You know this.

In our story, you can see where human efforts ended up. The parade is headed to Calvary, where we nailed Jesus to the cross. We marched up there, motivated by our furious desire to get it right, to do justice, to make the world safe, and look where it got us? Death. Violence. Again and again throughout history, we crucify someone. Whole communities and nations. So much for our noble ideals. More, much more, is needed.

Matthew says that Jesus walks down the street, hailed as prophet on Palm Sunday, and walked right into the temple. He was not just a visiting scholar from out of town. He became an earthquake that shook the place down to its foundations. He takes charge, roughs up the money-changers, and says they have mocked his Father's house.

The moneychangers were changing peoples' money so that they could offer sacrifices. They were there helping people get close to God. But here comes Jesus telling them that they're no longer needed. Perhaps this is a new *priest* taking charge of the temple, teaching there's another way to get close to God? Is he the priest with powerful prayers, healing the sick and making the blind to see, the lame to walk? Maybe he's a new line of priest?

But no, the crowds apparently had had enough of priests. They went quickly from prophet to *king*. The crowds hailed him, not only as a prophet, but also saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David. "Who is this?" He's the Son of King David. Anointed Royalty. Prophets spoke to Kings or about Kings. But now they're saying this prophet is a King!

You can imagine what the Romans soldiers, brought in for crowd control, must have thought. They had seen real parades in Rome. The conquering generals sat in chariots of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. Officers in polished armor displayed the banners captured from vanquished armies. And then came the ragtag processions of slaves and prisoners, living proof of what happened to those who defy the Pax Romana...

Jesus' triumphal procession included the lame, the blind, children, tax collectors, drunks, prostitutes, and peasants. As Jesus approached, riding on a borrowed donkey, the Roman soldiers probably laughed out loud.

No wonder the Jerusalem political establishment, King Herod, Pilate, and all their court chaplains were disturbed by this parade. They'd never seen anything like it. It's one

thing for one of these crazy Desert Prophets to preach *to* the king. It's another thing for one of them to role in, take charge, and be lauded *as* the King.

Who is this Jesus? Is he a prophet, priest, or king? Although he may function as all three, Jesus alone reveals his true identity. Hidden in mystery as to the fullness of its meaning, Jesus directs his disciples to find the donkey and colt, and says, "if anyone would say to you anything, you say, "the Lord has need of them..."

The word Jesus uses here for Lord is "kurios." This is the word used to translate the *tetragrammaton*, the very name which God gave to Moses, YHWH. Jews and later Christians would be crucified, burned, and thrown to the lions because they would refuse to bow down and say Ceasar is *kurios*, Ceasar is Lord, because there is but one Lord, one God and Savior of all. Although nobody recognized it at the time, they really had something to cheer about that first Palm parade. Jerusalem came thinking they would see a new prophet, priest, and king. But in fact, they saw the *Living God*.

That's why you're here, too, even if you didn't know that's why you're here today. You don't need any more advice, any more comforting, afflicting, moralizing words... You don't need any more authority, a new king or president. You need God. You want to see God. That's why you stand on your tiptoes, yearning, hoping to see the One leading this parade.

As we move through Holy Week, I invite you to consider, "Who is this" who moves toward you in this strange parade? Come to his table and receive this sacrament, his body, his blood, broken and shed for you. Here, may you see who Jesus really is, prophet, priest and King, maybe; but even more: Lord and Savior...the one who offers our broken-down old world a new way of self-giving love, a new life of forgiveness and mercy. Then with that great cloud of witnesses over the centuries, may you not only join in the shouts of Hosannah, but *follow*, wherever this parade may lead...

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*