

Palm Sunday
March 24, AD 2002
"Who is this?"
Matthew 21:1

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

1 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5 "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" 6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!" 10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" 11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." (NIV)

We recently had to buy a new telephone at our house. We got one with a "Caller ID" screen on it. You know how that works. After the first ring of the telephone, the phone company (for a modest fee, of course) sends you the number and name of the person who is calling you. You get to see who's on the other end of the line before picking up.

Well, it's not working. We got Caller ID to ward off some of telemarketing calls that come at inopportune times. Those calls are still coming through. People we want to talk to, however, are getting their calls blocked. So much for modern convenience technology.

I've got to hand it to whoever came up with the Caller ID concept, though. There's a market for it. People want to know who it is they're talking to, who it is they're dealing with. Or, more likely, they want to know who's coming so they can avoid them if necessary.

I bring this up because of the last two verses of the Gospel today. Each of the four writers-Matthew, Mark, Luke and John-records the basic events of Jesus' entry in Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. Each of them also highlights different details that the others don't. Only Matthew includes a little exchange between the

people of Jerusalem and the people of the crowd accompanying Jesus. **When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"**

"Who is this?" For an answer to that we could go to Barnes and Noble for a book on Jesus (there are a lot of those-take a look sometime). We could just brainstorm and come up our own ideas of who Jesus is or who we'd like him to be. But today, let's not do either of those things. Instead, let's look at the Bible-this section of Matthew's Gospel and a few other parts, and let God answer the question, "Who is this?"

1. The King with a mission

It was not by chance that Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey on that Sunday. He himself arranged it. There were other modes of transportation that weren't as hairy or as smelly and that required less effort to obtain-feet, for instance. But Jesus, letting some of his divine powers show through for a moment, arranges travel by donkey.

Matthew, as he does frequently throughout his Gospel, points out the reason for this way of traveling: **This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"** This was a signal. People connected the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed Savior, with an entrance on a donkey.

This maybe wasn't quite as odd as it sounds. Back in the days of David, the great king of Israel, David had wanted to announce that his son Solomon was to be the next king, David put Solomon on his mule and paraded him into the city, newly anointed as king.

Now, some thousand years later, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. By doing so, he was making a claim: "I am the king, the one to reign on David's throne, the one foretold by the prophets, the one coming to bring God's rule to earth, the one to defeat God's enemies."

Some of the people got the message. A large crowd formed around Jesus. People began to lay down their cloaks in front of Jesus, riding on his donkey-their improvised version, I guess, of rolling out the red carpet. And they hailed him with cheers and shouts. "Hosanna!" they cried, which means, "Save!" "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they said, knowing that Jesus was claiming kingship. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" they said, using the words of Psalm 118, a psalm people connected with the coming Christ. The King had arrived.

Why was a king needed? If you had asked most people in Jerusalem they likely would have given similar answers. An empire had conquered their land and was occupying it. A mighty king, a champion, was needed to restore the rule of Israel

to the people of Israel.

If you had asked Jesus why a king was needed, though, he would have given a different answer. Jesus saw a spiritual need in the people, not just a political one. He saw people who were like sheep without a shepherd, wandering from God into danger and into destruction for their souls. He saw a people riddled with guilt, a people doomed to death. He saw a people who thought they were on God's side, but who were actually making war with him by constantly sinning against his will. These problems Jesus came to address.

We see this numerous times throughout Jesus' ministry. Often, after Jesus had done some amazing miracle and demonstrated his divine power, he had said something strange. He had commanded the witnesses of the miracle not to speak of it. You see, Jesus didn't want to be known just for his power. And he didn't want to be viewed as a military champion. He came for a different purpose.

We get a hint of that in the section of the Old Testament Matthew mentions as he describes the Palm Sunday scene. **See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.** "Gentle"? Kings aren't usually acclaimed for being gentle. Well known kings in history are usually those who had power and used it.

Not Jesus. Jesus, you see, came as king, with a mission to win a decisive victory. But Jesus came not to shed others blood to win a victory, but to let his blood be shed. Our failures as parents and spouses, as children, as friends. Our failures as employees and employers. Our lackluster attitude toward serving God, or even toward serving other people whose needs are plain to us. All these sins had won. They had condemned us to hell. But then came Jesus, our King, and he did something to defeat sin and everything that goes with it. The guilt that condemned us all, the sin that spelled our doom, the alienation from God-Jesus came to have all those things piled on himself, so that we could be released from them.

That's what we heard Paul the apostle speaking of earlier: **[Christ Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8) By letting his blood be shed, this King won a victory over your sin and mine. Through Jesus, God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** (Colossians 1:13,14)

The king we needed is one who could take away our sins, who could bring us peace with God. Friends, this is the King who has come. This is the King who still

comes in an oddly humble way-not on a donkey but in his lowly sacraments and word. This is Jesus.

2. The Prophet with a message

When the people of Jerusalem asked, "Who is this?" as Jesus entered the city, do you remember what the crowds answered? "**This is Jesus, the *prophet* from Nazareth in Galilee.**"

A prophet is someone who speaks. Jesus did plenty of that. Matthew records many of the things Jesus said. The Sermon on the Mount, many of Jesus' parables-Matthew records them.

What we may forget about the things Jesus said was that many of them-a great many of them-ticked off the people who heard them. Jesus often said things that people did not want to hear.

Many of those things Jesus would say in the few days after Palm Sunday. Jesus would go right into Jerusalem, into the eye of the storm. He would go right into the Temple and commence railing on people. He would tell parables-stories whose messages were clear-saying that the people who thought themselves most worthy of God's blessing were actually going to miss out on it. Needless to say, these people didn't want to hear what Jesus was saying to them. These were the people who plotted, successfully, to have him killed.

But that's not all that Jesus said. Jesus also brought comforting news to burdened people. People who knew that they were on the outs with God-these people heard good news from Jesus. They heard that God was reaching out to them. They heard that God loved the brokenhearted and pledged to rescue them. This was the good news Jesus proclaimed to sinners.

Once in a while we see messages on TV from the men and women of our armed forces. But even when there are no taped messages coming our way from them, they still send us a message, don't they? Through what they do day by day-putting themselves in harm's way, risking their lives to defend us and our nation's freedoms-by voluntarily doing these things they send us a message. By being there and risking their lives, they tell us what they value and what they think it's worth dying for.

The clearest message Jesus delivered was through his actions. He was willing to lay down his life for us. That says a lot to us. Could there be a love more intense than one that's willing to give of itself to the point of death? Jesus riding into Jerusalem, knowing full well that he's going to meet suffering and death for our sakes-this sends a message. It's good news. "God loves us," is the message.

Martin Luther summed it up on Palm Sunday in the year 1522. "Isn't that good news, when there's someone full of sin and heavily burdened by it, and the gospel comes and says, 'Just trust and believe that your sins are all forgiven'? Isn't that good news, that I know that not only are all my sins forgiven, but also that Christ

and everything that he has with him is mine? Isn't that a gentle King, who is ready to come to the help of those who call on him?"

So call on him. Or better still, listen to him. When you pause this Friday and remember how Jesus suffered the wrath of God in your place, listen to the message being sent to you. You are loved. You are valued. Jesus gave up his life to give you a new, enduring life.

We're probably not going to stick with Caller ID. Pac Bell will have to live without my couple dollars each month. We'll probably go back to the old-fashioned version of Caller ID, which is me picking up the phone and asking, "Who is this?"

Thank God that we don't have to constantly ask that question when it comes to Jesus. Jesus is a king who completed a mission to save us. Jesus is a prophet who sends us an unmistakable message: God loves us and has done what it took to rescue us. Someone who did what we needed to be done, someone who said what we needed to be said-that's who Jesus is.

Who is this? This is our Savior. This is Jesus. *Amen.*