

## ENCOUNTER WITH A KING

Scriptures: Matthew 21:1-11, 12-17

I once met Jesus in downtown Spokane. He was shopping at Anderson Emani. You are probably wondering what Jesus was doing shopping at Anderson Emani. Actually, I was wondering what *I* was doing shopping at Anderson Emani. But at the time one of our church members, Bill Davidson, was working there, and I figured he would be a good person to help me pick out my once-every-ten-year suit. But when I got there, Bill said, “Hey, I’ve got someone for you to meet,” and he took me over to the men’s shirts, and there was Jesus. I recognized him immediately. It wasn’t actually Jesus, of course. It was Jim Caviezel, the actor who played Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*. I kind of stared, because the last time I had seen Jim Caviezel, just a few months before, he wasn’t wearing any shirt at all. He was striped with lash marks, face beaten to a pulp, blood running down his cheeks from a crown of thorns, and hanging from a Roman cross. And now here was that same face, that same body, trying on designer shirts in Riverpark Square. It was a little disorienting—a little like what I imagined happened on Palm Sunday.

Think about Palm Sunday. This itinerant preacher rides into town on a donkey, and he is treated like a royal celebrity. They spread coats and branches on the road, which is like rolling out the red carpet, and they shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Hosanna is a Hebrew word that means, “Please save!” The term “Son of David” refers to the promised king who would be descended from King David. So, in effect the crowd is shouting, “God save the king!”

But what kind of king is this? He rides not on a stallion, but on a donkey, a borrowed one at that. His followers, who have come from Galilee and other parts of Judea, proclaim him king, but the residents of Jerusalem don’t seem all that excited. Matthew says, “When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’” In Greek the verse says literally, “The whole city trembled,” which was the same reaction the people of Jerusalem had to Jesus’ birth. Back in Matthew, chapter 2, the wise men come to Jerusalem saying, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” And the next verse says, “When King Herod heard this, he trembled, and all Jerusalem with him.” If Jesus is a king, there is some question whether he will be welcome in his own capital.

Then Jesus arrives, but instead of throwing out the Romans, he throws out the merchants and moneychangers, his own people. He is cheered by beggars and children, but he alienates the chief priests and scribes, whose assistance he will need to run the government.

What kind of king is this whose majesty is displayed on a donkey, whose power base is children and beggars, who alienates the power brokers of his kingdom before he even sets foot in the palace, who does not even go to the palace but spends the night in a village outside of town?

These jarring incongruities become worse when we get to Good Friday. After his condemnation by the Jewish council they slap his face and say, “Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?” The leaders of his own nation call him the Messiah and laugh!

Then the Romans get a turn. After he is condemned by the Roman governor, the soldiers put a crown of thorns on his head and say, “Hail, King of the Jews” and strike him on the head, pushing the thorns deeper into his brow. And when he is crucified they put a sign over him that says, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” Is there anything more ironic: a prophet who cannot tell who hit him; a Messiah, who is supposed to save the Jews from the Romans, dying on a Roman cross?

Things are not always what they seem. There is a story passed on to me by people in our church about a man who walked into a doctor’s office. The receptionist asked what brought him in, and the man said, “Shingles.” So the receptionist wrote down his name, address, and medical insurance number and told him to take a seat. Fifteen minutes later a nurse came out and asked, “What brings you in today?” He said, “Shingles.” So the nurse took him to an examining room, recorded his height, weight, and blood pressure, and took a blood test. Then the nurse told him to take off all his clothes and wait for the doctor. A half hour later the doctor came in and asked what he had. The man said, “Shingles.” The doctor said, “Where?” The man said, “Out on the truck. Where do you want me to put them?”

Sometimes things are not what they seem. Sometimes people don’t understand what another person has got, and that is the story of Palm Sunday. As Jesus enters Jerusalem people shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” “God save the king.” But they don’t realize what kind of king they’ve got.

The story of Palm Sunday is the story of concealed majesty. Not only does Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey; it is a *borrowed* donkey. Jesus does not have the money even to buy his own donkey. And yet when he asks to borrow the donkey and its young colt, he says to the owner, “The Lord needs them,” as if Jesus’ need and God’s need are one and the same.

And they are. Because the donkey and the colt are needed to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah that says, “Tell the daughter of Zion [tell the people of Jerusalem], Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” That, by the way, is why Jesus needed both a donkey and its colt, because both are mentioned in the prophecy. But the whole image suggests hidden majesty, concealed kingship—like Jesus buying a shirt in Riverpark Square or dying on a cross outside Jerusalem.

Dale Bruner, one of my former teachers at Whitworth University, had a favorite saying. He said, “Jesus reveals enough of himself to make faith possible and conceals enough of himself to make faith necessary.”

That is the story of Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday Jesus reveals enough of himself to make faith possible but conceals enough of himself to make faith necessary.

So here is the question: Where are you in this story? Are you among those who follow Jesus saying, “God save the king,” or are you among those in the city who tremble, who wish he would go away because he threatens their security? Do you identify with the beggars and children who cheer him in the temple, or with the merchants and moneychangers who resent his

intrusion into their business practices? Are you Pilate, the Roman governor, sitting in judgment over him, or the thief on the cross asking for his mercy?

Jesus still comes into our world today as the hidden king. It is easy to mistake him or dismiss him. It is hard to understand him or follow him. But if we do, he will take us through the darkness of the cross to the sunrise of God's eternal kingdom.

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March 28, 2010