

Who Is This?

Matthew 21:1-13

Sundays in Lent: God Answers Life's Questions

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PALM SUNDAY - worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Maybe the most important question you can ever ask in your life is the question that's asked here by Matthew in this gospel: Who is this? Who is this Jesus of Nazareth, who comes into Jerusalem riding on the foal of a donkey?

This past week I was talking with another Presbyterian pastor in our region. Their church leaders recently interviewed dozens of people in their congregation, and they discovered that over 50% of worship attendees struggled with this question: Who is Jesus? They came to church seeking God, but they had a hard time saying that, in fact, Jesus is God. Many wanted to believe, but they were hesitant and skeptical. You see, a part of their struggle was that, if they really believed Jesus was God, they would have to change their life values, patterns, priorities, and habits. And that was too great a commitment; too big a leap, for many.

Where are you today with this question? Who is this, Jesus? Who is this man who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey? And who is he to you? Let us pray. Now, gracious God, through Jesus Christ, may you speak to us by the power of your Spirit, that we may not only hear, but we might believe and act in following Jesus into the world. In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here at The National Presbyterian Church, we have a number of visitors and regular attendees who were not raised in the Christian faith. We host people of many faiths: Islam; Judaism; Buddhism; Hinduism; and others. I often ask some of them why they come to this church. And they say something like this: "You talk about Jesus. We want to know more about Jesus. We are fascinated with Jesus."

The great Hindu leader, Mahatma Ghandi, was also fascinated with Jesus. He admired Jesus, and he often quoted from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. The missionary, E. Stanley Jones, was with Ghandi one day, and asked him a question: "Mr. Ghandi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear— so adamantly— to reject being his follower?" And Ghandi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ; I love your Christ. It's just that so many of your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Many of us who name the name of Jesus have not made the commitment to become like Jesus. We have not fully answered the question, "Who is this?" and "Who is this, to me?"

The New Testament gospels are fascinated with Jesus and invite us to follow him— not just claim his name. Matthew, in telling the story of Palm Sunday, wants us to take a lingering, and a deepening look at Jesus. He invites us to ask the key question of life. To answer is not easy, for it demands, in fact, a life-transforming commitment to follow Jesus, and live as he commands. When Jesus entered Jerusalem the last week of his life, Matthew wanted us to know that the whole city was asking one question: Who is this? If nothing else is true about why you and I are here today, somewhere in the depths of our souls and psyches, we are asking this same earth-shaking question: Who is Jesus?

In the Gospel of Matthew, there are four strategic events when Jerusalem is absolutely shaken to its foundations by the question about Jesus. Four times, the very foundations of its physical, political, and religious life are shaken; and the question, "Who is this person?" is, in some way, being asked. The first time is near Jesus' birth, when the Magi from the East come to Jerusalem and ask the question: "Where is the child who has been born, King of the Jews?" When King Herod heard this, he was frightened; he was shaken to the depths of his being, and all Jerusalem with him. Here, Herod was so emotionally and politically shaken because, in fact, if there is another king, his power and position are threatened. Because of this threat, he made the terrible decision to have all the little children of Bethlehem, under two years of age, killed — to wipe out the threat.

The second great shaking of Jerusalem came as Jesus entered the city on Palm Sunday. When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil; the whole city was 'shaken,' as if in an earthquake. "Who is this?" they cried out. Again, the political concern of religious leadership was that: If there is a king who is coming, who is he? And what should we do about him?

The third time of shaking was at the death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had died were raised from the dead. And the centurion, who was keeping watch over Jesus at the cross, felt the earthquake, in terror, said, "Truly, this man was God's son." The Roman centurion's answer to the question, Who is this?: This man was God's son.

The fourth time was a double shaking at the tomb of Jesus on Easter Sunday. Suddenly, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. For fear of him, the guards shook, and became like dead men. Who is this – that can so deeply shake the earth and the psyches of human beings that they cower in fear, as if they were dead? It is the key question of life. And we must answer that question.

Capital cities of nations tend to reverberate for an answer to this question— both searching and resisting... approaching and avoiding. We constantly search for that 'one leader who can ride into this city and set things right.' Washington, like Jerusalem, tends to be a very religious city. We talk about God a lot here. We use a lot of 'God language,' for better, or for worse. Too often, it's just for show— and not for righteousness or justice. The leaders of Jerusalem were adept at using 'God language,' as well. It had been the religious and political center of Israel for centuries. Political powers in histories tend to say, "In God We Trust" because it creates good political currency among the people. And while we search for a leader who will carry out both religious integrity and political clout while invoking the name of God, we get nervous when there is an attempt to put a human face on God.

Yet, that is exactly what humanity hungers to find. We look for a Messiah who is both, human like us— but much better than us— "Godlike." In every search for a primary leader, I believe... in every nomination for a president... in every election of a governor... in every appointment of a CEO... we tend to look for that person who is both human, and Godlike. There is a 'messianic' expectation attached to leaders that expects more than they can possibly deliver. Our very humanity cries out to find... and to know... One who is both man and God. We look for the One who will have both the moral integrity and social ethical sagacity to lead us. And with each new leader, we bring into this city, or into the places of responsibility, we hope that he or she might be the one who can bring it all, and make it all happen: justice; balance; and righteousness. But every leader fails us. Every leader, after we work with them, get to know them, live with them awhile, shows us their flawed side. We note their failures; we start keeping score of our lost expectations; and then we begin to look for another one. The next time, maybe, we'll find someone who can give us more, and be better. We keep looking, wondering: Where is he? Who is this one? Is this the one?

Israel has been looking for a Messiah for thousands of years— ever since the time of Abraham. The three great monotheistic religions of the world who have common roots in Abraham answer this great question differently: "Who is this Jesus?" Reform Judaism looks at Jesus as a really good man who understood God and lived God's way better than most, if not the best. Jesus is a very good man, but he's surely not divine. Modern Islam looks at Jesus as a great prophet who points us to God with his life and teaching, but is not God. God cannot ever be human; that is blasphemy. But the Gospels of the New Testament proclaim a unique answer to the question: "Who is this?"

A few years ago, I was talking with a Jewish man who attends this church; he had a number of questions about Jesus. He keeps coming, over the months and years, and has, on occasion, had dreams about Jesus. And he continues to ask the question in his own life: Who is this Jesus? Ancient Judaism even had a certain interest in... and ambivalence toward... Jesus, as Messiah. A rabbi of around 250 A.D. said, "If Israel was worthy, the Son of Man would come to her on the clouds of Heaven; if unworthy, he would come riding on an ass."

When recording the earth-shaking event of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Matthew quoted seven Old Testament prophecies to answer the question: Who is this? The number "seven" suggests that Matthew is communicating the complete and full nature of God, in Jesus— as God's perfect answer to the human question: "Who is this?" Matthew did not want us to miss the magnificent significance of this moment in the gospel, to prove absolutely who Jesus is. From Isaiah, chapter 62: "Daughter of Zion," (that is, Jerusalem) Jesus is "God's salvation coming to earth." Jesus is Messiah. From Zechariah 9:9, "Your King comes humble and riding on the colt of a donkey." Jesus, as King, is human, and humble. From 2 Kings 9:13, "The King rides into Jerusalem while the people lay their coats under his feet." Jesus is their King. From Psalm 118, "Blessed is the One who comes in the festival procession of palm branches, in the name—the full nature of the Lord." Jesus is God's promised Messiah. From Isaiah, chapter 56: "God is coming to his holy mountain Zion (Jerusalem) to bring joy and to make a house of prayer." Jesus is God, coming to Jerusalem; Jesus is coming to his own temple. Jeremiah chapter 7: human leaders have turned the house of God into a den of robbers and God turned the tables on them. Jesus is God coming into the Temple to set things right. Psalm 8: "Out of the mouths of babes and infants, they declare the majestic, Sovereign Lord is present in the Temple." Jesus is the one who created the heavens and the earth. Jesus is God. The children know it; but the adult leaders fear it. Matthew, you see, in homiletic detail and poetic balance, is answering the question: Who is this Jesus? He announced, from every angle he could, that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the Christ—the Son of Man and the Son of God. Jesus, the Christ, is both human and divine. Jesus is the one man in history who can meet the human hunger for the perfect leader. There will never be another human being like him.

Jesus answers our paradoxical yearning for human vulnerability and accessibility, along with divine power and being. Jesus' very identity as incarnate God, is an eternal dialectic between humanity and divinity. He is lowly royalty. He is the modest King. He is the humble Lord. He is the crucified Messiah. He is the one who died for us, and He is the one whom God raised to new life. He descended into Hell, and he also ascended into Heaven. We humans tend to have unreal and self-absorbed expectations about leadership, and about God. Because we are sinners, our assumptions are distorted; we want a Messiah on our terms. Even Jesus, as the Son of God and Son of Man, could not meet the warped expectations of human leadership in that time...or today. We don't want a humble Messiah; we want a grand king. We want a Messiah who visibly conquers now— not later.

That's not Jesus. C. S. Lewis was a seeker of God and a skeptic about Jesus for many years, but in his great, apologetic work, *Mere Christianity*, he said:

I am trying, here, to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher but I don't accept his claims to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg; or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God or else a madman, or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon. Or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us; and he did not intend to.

Children often have a clearer sense of the answer to the question than educated adults. They do not look for a person with political clout or philosophical sophistication. They do not look for a victorious general, or a popular president. They do not look for someone with wealth or status. Children look for a real human being who loves them the way God would love them; and they recognize, somehow in their deepest instinct, this lover and this Lord, Jesus. They know he is God. And when they hear about Jesus, in Jesus, they recognize God's presence. The children know how to answer the question, "Who is this?" Matthew says that the children saw Jesus in the temple healing people and began chanting the old Psalm about a loving and good God processing into the temple. The children cry out to Jesus in a kind of rhythmic rap chant, "O, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His steadfast love endures forever. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. You are my God and I will give thanks to you. You are my God and I will praise you." Who is this? Listen to the children for the answer.

Calvin noted, in his commentary on this passage, that great spiritual powers of the first century sought to

suppress the faithful witness to Jesus by the little people. And while the children are apt to get it right, we adults find all sorts of reasons to reject Jesus as Messiah— Son of God, Son of Man. We have such controlling expectations that he will never fulfill, and could not fulfill. We get angry when he challenges our assumptions. We get lost in the quagmire of our inquiry and analysis. We want to determine the outcome; but Jesus, in fact, is sovereign... and he determines the outcome. We resist answering the question because it will cost us our control— our sovereignty over our own lives.

Today, I ask you to listen to the child that is still within you. Let the true child of God in you cry out in clarity with your answer to this question, “Who is this?” Find your way to the most obvious answer, even though it might turn your world (and it will turn your world) upside down. This is Jesus of Nazareth— not just a good man... not just a prophet... not just a teacher... not just a leader or a healer; not just a worker of miracles... not just a kind shepherd of people. Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Man. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus is your Lord, and my Lord. Where are you with the answer to the question? Let us pray. O, Lord Jesus Christ, now, by the power of your Word, spoken through the Spirit to our hearts, may you help us to answer this question with clarity. As we are hesitant, may you give us courage to move forward, following Jesus. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.