

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 (p. 951)

APRIL 9, 2017

MATTHEW 21:1-11 (p. 801)

BLAINE

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Wipe the scales from our eyes Lord, and break the hardened crust that encases our hearts, for we are here to study your Word on a Glorious Day. Redirect our focus right now, and realign our wills, so that you are the center of all that we say and do. And please, make the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' name we ask this, Amen.

“PEDASTAL, TOMB, THRONE

“Who is this?” ... “Why this is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” ... “Yeah, but, who is this?” And that’s really the question, isn’t it? It has been for centuries in fact! “Who is this, this guy named Jesus, this supposed King who’s coming into our town, our lives, and shaking things up more than a bit!”

The text says the whole city was “stirred”! This is a whirlwind, a political and religious one! But it is also an emotional roller coaster! Not a single person in all of Jerusalem, or for that matter the surrounding countryside—or down through history in fact, and to the far corners of the earth—is unaffected by this momentous day! So the question is paramount, isn’t it, for both you and me! “Who is this”?

The Scribes and the Pharisees want to know because they are the religious establishment. And this Jesus could easily undermine their entire time-honored belief system! The Chief Priests and Elders, the Teachers of the Law, are trying to discern by what “authority” Jesus is doing these amazing things! And the Government wants to know—the Roman Overlords, along with their puppet kingdom run by Herod—because if this is some kind of uprising—a rebellion or military coup—then they need to squash it immediately! Everyone wants to know who this Jesus is!

The average person on the street wants to know, because if Jesus really is the long-awaited King, the one descended from David, then this is not a moment to miss! And the folks who have seen the miracles certainly want to know, because if Jesus is the Messiah—if He is who He says He is—then there are eternal ramifications here! And I imagine those standing outside of Lazarus’ tomb want to know, don’t you, because this is the guy who raises people from the dead, right!

Even the Disciples want to know. Or at least make sure. I mean, they must be a swirl of emotions themselves! They have been hanging around with Jesus now for over three years! And they’ve seen some extraordinary things! Some of them were actually eye witnesses to the Transfiguration, remember! Others drank the water that Jesus turned into wine at the wedding in Cana! Still others saw Him walk on the water, or saw Him calm the storm with just a word!

All of the Twelve would have helped Him pick up leftovers after the feeding of thousands with just a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread! They have all heard Him teach and preach! They've witnessed His life first-hand! They should already know!

And yet one of them is about to betray Him. And another, in just five days will publicly deny even knowing Him! Three times in fact! Not a solitary one of them will stand beside Him as He endures torture, and the most grueling death known to man. So maybe they don't know? ...On the other hand, all of them, with the exception of course of Judas—who killed himself, in remorse—will willingly die as martyrs after the Resurrection! Even when all they had to do to save themselves was simply denying their faith in Jesus as Lord! So, I wonder if they knew.

As they approach Jerusalem they find themselves in the midst of a very large crowd gathered on the Mount of Olives. Together they will process down through the Kidron Valley and up into the city in a great big parade. They will pass through the Beautiful Gate, shouting and waving palm fronds, praising God with all of their heart and soul! They have answered the question apparently, at least on the surface, at least temporarily. "This is Jesus, the Prophet from Nazareth in Galilee"! But most of them, I think, are still wondering; "Yeah, but what does that mean?"

Again, that's the question, isn't it, ours as well as theirs. And how we answer it does have profound ramifications! Eternal ramifications! If we respond one way, we'll watch this Middle Eastern parade today and just smile. And then go right on with our daily life.

It was a fun journey. The people all looked good. The celebration was simply amazing!
Only, what does any of this have to do with me?

But if we answer the question another way, we'll most likely start to follow Jesus. At a safe distance of course! Cautious, but curious! Willing, at least at first, maybe even a little anxious to see more! Show me something Jesus, impress me. Maybe then I'll hang around for a while! Keep me entertained, or fed, or prosperous, and I'll stay!

But then, if we answer the question in still another way, we'll probably find ourselves dropping to our knees as Christ steps before us in this majestic parade! Right here and right now, we'll stoop down and grab a palm frond of our own, and step into the middle of the pageant ourselves! ...It's a great question, isn't it, one that causes a definite fork in your theological road! Who is this Jesus, this One known as Messiah? What is all this fuss really about?

It's Passover in Jerusalem, tourist season, and the city is packed! The population is somewhere between 40 and 60 thousand normally. But during religious festivals like this, well, it would swell to over a quarter of a million! The hotels would all be booked! The Inns were full from morning to night!

The Law of God, given through Moses, commands that all believers commemorate the Exodus each and every year. The faithful must celebrate their Salvation by God's own hand, sacrificing an innocent lamb and sharing a Seder meal.

And the only appropriate place to offer a sacrifice to Almighty God is in the Great Temple in the city of Jerusalem, on mount Zion itself! So the faithful are making their annual pilgrimage from far-away lands, when this Galilean Prophet, comes riding into town on a donkey, followed ironically by a whole entourage of screaming folk!

Jesus has entered the stage like a Pulitzer Prize winner author, or a Rock Star, or your favorite contestant on American Idol! People are screaming “Save Us,” “Save Us,” “Hosanna,” “Hosanna,” and flailing their arms in the air! There is an atmosphere of excitement! There has not been a real king in Israel for almost six hundred years, since the time of Solomon, David’s son!

They are waving palm fronds like a sea of flags. The emotions are at a fever pitch! There is a smile on every single face! The people are rolling out the red carpet, covering the streets with their coats and tree branches, excited that a celebrity has come to town! Its Oscar night, the Fourth of July, and the Country Music Awards all rolled into one! Enthusiastic followers line both sides of the street, cheering with all their might! The only thing missing is the Paparazzi, which come to think of it, may be Matthew’s role!

Jesus is the star running back who has just scored the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl! The crowds want to hoist Him up onto their shoulders! “You’re the man, our hero! We are right here with you!” Imagine what that was like! ...Now ask yourself, if that was you, how could you not let something like that go to your head?

The Apostle Paul, the author of much of the New Testament. says that our attitude, the way we encounter the world, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; “who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, and became obedient, obedient even unto death, even unto death on a cross.”

Corrie ten Boom was once asked if it was difficult for her to stay humble with all of the notoriety and such. Her reply was simple. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments on the road, and singing praises, do you think for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him?”

She went on, “If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in His glory, I can give Him all the praise and honor.” You attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus! That begs the question, doesn’t it? Who is this Jesus, this Prince of Peace and Lord of Lords? Who is this Jesus to me?

It’s Palm Sunday, and churches around the world are celebrating! People are waving palms and shouting Hosanna! And next Sunday, on Easter morning, the Faithful will gather in joy to give thanks to God that Jesus has burst forth from the grave conquering death and sin, creating a way for each of us to stand in God’s Holy Presence! And from these two mountaintop vistas—Palm Sunday and Easter Morning—it’s easy to see Christ the King!

We hoist Jesus, our Lord and Savior up onto a pedestal, and visualize Him processing down the streets in all of the Pomp and Circumstance, or sitting at the right hand of God in all of His Glory! But there is more! Much more! You simply can't get from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without going through the events of Holy Week! You just can't! And if you try, you miss a lot, in fact the entire point! You see today is also known as Passion Sunday, which illuminates a whole other dimension of who this Jesus really is!

Jesus has made it quite clear, prior to this parade that He is heading to Jerusalem to be put to death! He has mapped out the entire plan ahead of time. There are no surprises here. Today's procession into town marks the beginning of the end. In the next few days Jesus will continue to share amazing teachings. He will address abuses in the current religious system. He will continue to heal those who are afflicted. He is a great healer, a wise religious reformer, and a superb moral instructor, to be sure! But that's not all!

He will also sit down at the Passover Meal with his friends to recall all of the blessings that God has bestowed upon His people—freedom from captivity, providence in the wilderness, and salvation in the Promised Land! He will kneel before them and humbly wash their feet, including those of His close friend Judas who will betray Him, and Peter who will deny even knowing Him, thus demonstrate unconditional love. Later that night Jesus will undergo an agonizing time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He will be arrested, violently, in the middle of the night. He will be put on trial several times, and beaten beyond anything we can imagine! If you haven't seen the movie "The Passion of Christ", you may want to! It's horrible, and graphic, and filled with love!

A crown of thorns will be jammed down into His head, and the fickle crowds will start screaming again! Only this time it will be “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Another parade will begin. Only in this one, Jesus will carry His ever-so-heavy Cross through the streets of the city lined with jeering crowds! Finally, just before noon, without a single complaint from His lips, Jesus will lay very still as they drive the spikes through His hands and His feet into that wooden cross, and then, drop it into the ground with a thud!

That’s who Jesus is, in case you didn’t know! That’s the answer to the question! Jesus is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us! He is the creative Word that was there at the beginning, and the redeeming Word who came and spoke on our behalf! He is the incarnate Word of God who willingly and obediently went to that Cross in our place, paying for all our sins and taking on the punishment that we deserve! All so that we might have a righteous relationship with God, and walk in His Holy Presence for all of eternity! That’s who Jesus is!

You know there are all kinds of witnesses to who Jesus really is, many of which look at Jesus from different angles. There is the condemned criminal hanging next to Him who mocks Him with words of contempt, and the other one who accepts Him as Lord and is thus saved. There are the political leaders and religious ones of every stripe who resist, or twist everything He says in order to hang onto power themselves. There are the Disciples who deny Him and betray Him—and yet who walk on water themselves, and who heal people in His name after they repent!

There are the crowds, the fickle selfish crowds, who on Sunday exalt His presence, and then by Friday forget Him completely, or scream for His death, or in their apathy, treat Him as if it were already so! And there are a faithful few, of course, who even in the darkest hour kneel at the foot of the Cross weeping, and then look up!

The most powerful witness though, at least for me, is the Roman Centurion who stands at the foot of the Cross as well. This is a Master Sergeant, a Legionnaire, a man who commands a hundred tough fighting men—a man who administered beatings and punishments in order to keep his men in line—a man who holds grave responsibility, including carrying out executions for those who are condemned to death, like Jesus!

This is a fierce, tough, Roman soldier who watches with fascination as all these things happened to this man of God! He has never seen a man take such cruelty without responding in bitterness, with no cry for pity! He has never seen such a humble man so obedient to his cause! ...And after holding all of this emotion inside, and all of this truth, for as long as he can, this Centurion finally cries out from the very depths of his soul; “Truly! Truly! This is the Son of God”!

And that, my friends, brings us right back to the beginning! Standing here on Passion Sunday, about to step into the events of Holy Week, tell me, who is this Jesus to you? And all of God’s people said, Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Humbly Lord, we bow before you this morning. Not because you see us that way, but because we see ourselves in the light of the truth, and know we fall short of your Glory. We come humbly, not because you have chosen to elevate yourself above us, or away from us. But rather because you have chosen to come to us in love, and live with us, and be with us in community, in a personal relationship, even though we clearly do not deserve this honor. It is this great privilege that causes us to be so humble, and this honor that causes us to give you praise!

Lord, we are grateful for your gift of life, and for the many gifts that you give us within this life. We are grateful for wisdom and the ability to learn. We are grateful for health and the ability to make ourselves healthier. We are grateful for our hearts, and the ability to reflect, for the realization that we are sinners, and the ability to come to you for forgiveness. We are grateful for the many blessing you bestow upon our lives, and for the ability to bless others in your Name. And mostly Lord, we are grateful for the gift of your Holy Spirit, grateful to be called together in your Name and grateful to be able to come before you with our petitions and pleas.

Lord, you have heard our silent prayers, and you know our heart-felt joys as well as the burdens that are dragging us down. You know what makes us smile, and you know what troubles our hearts. You have just heard our requests and our thanksgivings as dearly loved children. So now Lord, hear us as a family, your family, as we collectively set down some additional cares. We lift up

We place these loved ones into your presence Lord, asking that you will touch their lives. We lay down their burdens and their troubles at the foot of your Cross, asking that you will replace them all with your overwhelming peace. We offer up all of our cares and all of our concerns as well, all of our praises, and all of our celebrations to you Lord, for you are the author of life. And we do this in Jesus' name, with the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...