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Reframe: Who is this?

Matthew 21:1-11

Jeff Marian

Growing up, Palm Sunday was one of my favorite church celebrations. Anyone else? After all the gloom of Lent, the festive hymns, the waving of palms and dawning of Spring made for a Sunday morning that even a restless kid like me could enjoy. In my little boy brain, I envisioned Jesus entering Jerusalem in something that resembled the Macy's Day Parade, heralded as a hero by thousands of excited and happy people. But the more I've learned about this story and the history behind it, the more I've come to realize that the reality is much darker. It's a story that asks us questions like, "Who is this Jesus?" and "What kind of messiah will you follow?" Let's read the story together and I'll explain what I mean.

Our Scripture reading comes from Matthew 21:1-11. Matthew writes,

As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. "Go into the village over there," he said. "As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will immediately let you take them." This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said, "Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey - riding on a donkey's colt.'"

The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. They brought the donkey and the colt to him and threw their garments over the colt, and he sat on it. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting,

"Praise God for the Son of David!

Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise God in highest heaven!"

The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as he entered. "Who is this?" they asked.

And the crowds replied, "It's Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

To understand what Matthew is trying to proclaim to us we need to understand the context of this story. It's the Passover Festival, one of the pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish calendar. That means that every Israelite who could travel to Jerusalem, should, for the week of celebrations and worship services. And let's remember what the Passover Festival is. It was a time when the Israelites celebrated God setting their ancestors free from their Egyptian oppressors. And why does that matter? Because at this time in history the Israelites were being oppressed by the Romans. So, we've got a festival celebrating freedom amongst a people who are brutally oppressed. Can you feel the tension? Can you imagine the potential civil unrest?

And because of all that tension a regiment of Roman soldiers would be parading into the city of Jerusalem at the start of the festival. Foot soldiers in gleaming armor, carrying swords and spears. Officers riding war horses. All of it meant to intimidate the Jews in Jerusalem into thinking twice about creating a riot. And at the head of that parade would be a standard-bearer, a soldier carrying a tall pole with a golden eagle at the top, the emblem of Roman power. This is the Kingdom of Caesar. In the first century Caesar was the one hailed as the son of god and the savior, but Caesar was a savior who sought to create "peace" through fear and intimidation.

And on the other side of the city enters a very different parade, the one that Matthew describes. A prophet from Nazareth who has stirred the hopes of the people that perhaps this is their messiah, the One who will free them from Roman oppression. And as he rides into the city on a donkey every Israelite would have thought about these words from the prophet Zechariah, *Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt. I will remove the battle chariots from Israel and the warhorses from Jerusalem. I will destroy all the weapons used in battle, and your king will bring peace to the nations.*

Do you see now what Matthew is doing? Far from painting a picture of a happy celebration like the one I imagined as a child, Matthew is creating a decision point for you and me. He's asking, "Which savior, which messiah, will you follow?"

It's so easy to say, "Well, of course I'm going to follow the way of Jesus!" But before you go there let me ask you a few questions:

Think back to the last trivial argument you had over something like where you were going to have dinner. Did you push to have your way, or did you willingly yield to the other person's preference?

When you see the pain and injustice of this world do you seek comfort through avoidance or the discomfort of engagement?

When an opportunity to be generous presents itself do you calculate what you can afford or do you respond because you can't afford not to?

When someone offends you do you desire to strike back or turn your back on them, or do you freely forgive?

Back in late January I was flying back to Minneapolis after visiting my family in Tucson. When the plane landed and we arrived at our gate we all began to gather our things to deplane. If you've flown at all you know that there is an unspoken protocol to getting off the plane. You get off by rows starting at the front. But on this particular flight, even before the flight crew opened the door, some guy from several rows back just walked up the center aisle and wound up right next to my aisle seat. It was late, so he wasn't rushing to make a connecting flight. He just wanted to get off the plane and didn't care if everyone else had to wait. Now, I know that you'll find this hard to believe, but in that moment, with every fiber of my being, I wanted to give him a piece of my mind. How ironic that someone who spends his life encouraging people to follow the way of Jesus so quickly and easily follows the way of Caesar.

The way of Caesar is the way of "me first", the way of demanding our rights and forcing our way. It's the way of fear that there isn't enough for all. It's the way of thinking that in order for some to 'win' others must lose. At the heart of it, the way of Caesar doesn't trust that God is good or that God for us, so we have to take matters into our own hands.

But the way of Jesus is humility self-giving love. It's the way of believing in the goodness and the abundance of a God who is with u and for us and at work in ways we can't begin to imagine. That doesn't mean that we sit back and do nothing. It doesn't mean that we need to become the world's doormats. Jesus was no doormat. There are times when standing up for yourself or for others is the right thing to do. We often need to Spirit to help us discern when we're called to protect a sacred value, like justice, or when it's our ego that's in control.

I wonder if I had lived in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, which parade would I have followed. Would it be the one with all the pomp and flash and power of a Roman regiment, or the humble parade of peasants led by a backwater prophet riding a donkey? I'm afraid that I know the answer, and I'm not proud it.

But the larger truth is that every day of our lives there are two parades, two ways of living, that invite us to follow. And they are still the way of Caesar or the way of Jesus. Which messiah will you follow? I want to challenge you to wrestle with that question this week. Come on Maundy Thursday as we remember Jesus washing feet, pouring himself out in bread and wine, and calling us to love others as he loved us. And ask yourself, "Is this the messiah that I will follow?"

And come on Good Friday as we recall how Jesus chose to confront sin, death and the way of Caesar...by dying on a cross. And ask yourself, "Is this the messiah that I will follow?" Whether you answer "yes", "no" or "I'm not sure", come to worship throughout Holy Week and on Easter weekend and see where the journey of following the way of Jesus both begins and ends and begins again. Let's pray....

Jesus, you call us to follow you, to follow in your way of humility and self-giving love, but we find it so difficult. We've been weaned in a world that loves the way of Caesar and if we're honest we do not like the taste of humility and self-giving love. Forgive us, cleanse us and give us new hearts that beat with a passion to follow in the way of Jesus. Lord, want to be more like you. We want to live more like you. We want to love more like you. It is your name, Jesus, that we pray. Amen.