

Giving Up Pigeonholing Jesus

a sermon for Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017, delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno

Based on Matthew 21:1-11

If you are at all interested in knowing where Jesus really came from you can do worse than look at the description of his small hometown, Nazareth, as described by Reza Aslan.

Ancient Nazareth rests on the jagged brow of a windy hilltop in lower Galilee. No more than a hundred Jewish families lived in this tiny town. There were no roads, no public buildings. There was no synagogue. The villagers shared a well from which to draw fresh water. A single bath, fed by a trickle of rainfall captured and stored in underground cisterns, served the entire population. It was a village of mostly illiterate peasants, farmers, and day laborers; a place that did not exist on any map. The hillside hamlet of Nazareth was, in fact, so small, so obscure, that its name does not appear in any ancient Jewish source before the third century ... It was an inconsequential and utterly forgettable place.

And look, Jesus was fully identified with it. He was known throughout his life simply as “the Nazarean.” Considering how common the first name Jesus was, the city became his principal moniker. It was the one thing everyone knew about him – his friends and his enemies alike.

If you go to modern Nazareth you are struck by those abrupt hills that compose it. I remembering worrying over the safety of the children who live there, so steep are they. And in the city you cannot help but see that it is primarily Muslim (69%).

Some call it the Arab capital of Israel. In fact the most prominent building aside from the Roman Catholic Church there, is the minaret of the mosque where the muezzin calls Nazareth’s Muslim faithful to prayer five times a day.

On this Palm Sunday, the gospel writer, Matthew, reminds us that it is Jesus the Nazarean who enters the great city, Jerusalem, King David’s ancient city.

Is it any wonder, then, that on the first Palm Sunday people asked “Who is this?” That day Matthew tells us that Jesus entered the Golden Gate riding on a donkey, or a colt, or both. “Who is this?” the urban folk ask, and the answer is, “the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee,” that tiny town that rested on the jagged brow of a windy hilltop, that “inconsequential and utterly forgettable place.”

Of all the things that they might have said about Jesus in response to the question, “Who is this?” the one stark, understated thing that they do say is, “Well he is a “prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

This is the faintest of praise. It’d be like saying he was Mayor of Erda.

The place-name serves to lower the respectability of the word, prophet.

Now they might have said of him, this is the healer, exorcist, raiser-from-the-dead, the stiller of storms, the anointed one of God, the long awaited messiah." All those things, but what they said instead was, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth."

Well, people only see what they are programmed to see in this world. We judge others, including Jesus, using the templates we have at hand.

Over 100 years ago, Albert Schweitzer said this about our differing views of Jesus: "Each successive epoch has found its own thoughts in Jesus' thoughts, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live."

Today we have a goodly number of differing interpretations of Jesus, since, as Schweitzer said, people tend to take for granted that Jesus thinks the way they do: I've summed such opinions up for you in a sermon or two before. Here's my revised list.

There's Therapist Jesus who helps us cope with life's problems. He doesn't like drug therapies, preferring instead to tell us how valuable we are and not to be so hard on ourselves.

Then, there's Open-minded Jesus who loves everyone all the time no matter what, except for people who are not open-minded who he would hate if he could, but - he's Jesus.

There's Touchdown Jesus who helps our favorite athletes run faster and jump higher than athletes we don't like. Thank you Jesus.

There is Twitter Jesus whose parables are never over 140 characters.

There is Sustainability Jesus who cannot wait to say, loudly, "I told you so" about Global Warming, once the state of Florida is under water.

There's Spirituality Jesus who hates religion, churches, pastors, priests, and creeds; and would rather have people out in nature, finding the god within.

There's Socialist Jesus who loves Bernie Sanders, understands the plight of coal miners, is critical of Wall Street, and Wal-Mart too.

And then there's *Freedom Caucus* Jesus for those who think Ted Cruz IS Jesus.

When I think of Palm Sunday Jesus, I have a picture in my mind from an early film where a smiling, American looking Jesus, in a tan robe, with a well-trimmed brown beard and piercing blue eyes is riding into town on the back of a donkey.

The kindly folk of Jerusalem are thrilled to see him, not knowing that in only a few days this same welcoming crowd will have become hostile, calling for Barabbas, and shouting "Crucify" in answer to Pilate's question of what to do with him.

But the major chord that is struck today has always seemed like some downtown event, like the St. Patrick's Day Parade through Gateway, where the strolling shoppers stop staring at the merchandise and their smart phones long enough to look down and see what the shouting and cheers below are all about. Think of Mardi Gras in David's Royal City. Think of the Pride Parade but smaller, with the donkey and with more clothes on; very festive and joyful.

But of course if we strip away the palms and get down to the facts as reported by Matthew, we see that what might at first have appeared as a large celebration may really have been just a demonstration that petered out quickly, this being Jerusalem.

I mean there is this tiny bit of intrigue, the sending of two disciples into a nearby town to fetch a donkey and use the password that the Lord has need of it.

And then there's the crowd with the palm branches and the cloaks on the road and the cries of "Hosanna, to the Son of David, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

But maybe it was just the insiders, the disciples who were shouting that, beating on pots and pans, trying to make a show of it but not really getting much traction. I mean is this really how to change the world? Is this how a prophet arrives on the red carpet in a capitol city -- no limousine -- no bodyguards?

People on the side of the street must have asked the obvious question. "Who is this?" And some in the know said, "This is the prophet Jesus -- from Nazareth in Galilee."

Psalm 24 asks the question: "Who is king of glory?" And it answers: "The Lord, strong and mighty."

But here in Matthew's gospel, there is deliberate confusion. "Who is this?" they ask, "Is this the King of Glory?"

"Well, eh, this is a prophet . . . from Nazareth."

He was a carpenter. A country rube. Not formally versed in the scriptures the way the scribes and Pharisees were trained in the scriptures.

His followers had no phylacteries, no prayer shawls, no kippas. Their bony, calloused hands were the hands of Galilean fishermen. Their traveling companions were people of questionable character, tax collectors, unaccompanied women, sinners.

“Who is this,” they asked as the disciples stirred up the crowd.

“No one we know,” is the answer.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? was the question asked, jokingly, in Jesus’s day.

The folks who stepped out their kitchen doors to look, drying their hands on dishtowels asked, “Who is this?” “What’s all the noise?”

The Roman soldiers keeping watch on the gates where Israeli soldiers now keep watch, must have chuckled at a parade with no military presence at all; a minor episode in an otherwise unremarkable day.

Matthew tells us “the whole city was in turmoil,” but even Matthew seems a bit ambivalent as to what to make of this story. Because what follows immediately in the gospel is the story of Jesus overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. The lame and the blind come to him in the temple and he heals them. And then Matthew says, “He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.”

Had he really thought out what he would do? There’s some street theater, some performance art, and as the hour was late, he went to the suburbs to get a good night’s sleep.

It’s the vulnerability of the man that we can’t help but notice here; the painful lack of power when contrasted with the powers of the great city he wasn’t very familiar with. This was King Solomon’s city; the great Temple was there, the Temple police, the scribes and Pharisees, the Roman authorities and a legion of soldiers.

No more teaching on the hillside with great crowds surrounding him. Jesus rides a donkey, and enters the Roman Capitol to waving palm branches as people ask, “Who is this?” and then go back to what they were doing.

Anybody who has ever felt overwhelmed by the odds against them, by life. Anyone who has wondered what in the world they are doing in *this city*, competing with all the competition, running this race, facing modern difficulties, can feel for Jesus today.

They are going to kill him. And it is not going to be pretty. And he himself has said so already.

So I am thinking that the view from the backside of that donkey is what is on his mind today; what lies ahead, the prospect of that cross is already making him tremble.

Anybody who has awakened in the morning and wondered if they even wanted to rise from bed can feel the fear of what's going on today.

Anybody who has gotten onto a gurney and been wheeled down the hospital corridor and watched the florescent lights strobe above you as you move toward having them do what they're going to do with knives and clamps and retractors... knows the anxiety of what is going on today.

Anybody who has felt overwhelmed by the kids and the play-dates and the dancing lessons and making the meals, and working late, and the partner who has to travel for work to keep bread on the table, can feel the loneliness of what's going on today.

Anybody who has stood before a court, waiting for a verdict, waiting for divorce papers, waiting for a jury... knows the uncertainty of what's going on today.

Anybody who has sat in the doctor's office waiting to hear what stage of cancer it is, and what is going to be the treatment plan and what are the possible side effects ... knows the feeling in Jesus' gut today.

Jesus rides into the city vulnerable, facing the worst; lauded by a crowd who have to ask, "Who is this?"

He is brave, this rube from Nazareth of Galilee, because that's about all that will get him through. Bravery and faith; the belief that God will not forsake him but that God will go with him even as he faces his final days; a belief that in a crucial hour he will question.

He will die on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem, this Nazarene from Galilee. And they will put up a sign, a joke really, except that no one much will laugh, "The King of the Jews" it will say. What a joke!

Almost as funny as "a prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." But at least he rides today, head held high, facing into the city.

So, anyone who is unsure of what the future will bring, of what their hope against hope may be... take heart this morning.

Anyone facing overwhelming odds, feeling crushed by life, lonely, hurt, discouraged... take heart.

Anyone struggling with the things that you feel are stealing your life away... take heart.

If that "truth" that you have been trying not to hear, or trying not to say out loud looks like it finally has to be spoken ... take heart.

Jesus enters the city today, for the sake of a cause that only God could undertake, an expression of love so great that no one from this day on need ever face the worst that life can throw at us alone.

Because he has been there, this prophet from Nazareth. He has faced the loneliness and pain of the cross to show how deep, how great is God's love for us.

He knows the extreme ups and downs of life, and neither has changed him -- and that's part of what makes him Jesus.

Next week this church will be full of lilies. We will sing, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." We will look springy, unless it snows again. The earth will ring with joy, and hope will be born anew.

But first he goes to the city, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that God sends to it. Think of our brother and sister Christians in Egypt, killed this morning with Palm branches in their hands.

Holy week contains Good Friday.

This is the part where most people look away. And yet, it is in the midst of these events, the Last Supper, the betrayal, the arrest and trial, the crucifixion, that we learn how to live, and we learn how to die, and we discover that even God knows what it is to know our life, even our death.

So come, Lord Jesus, riding high. Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The prophet Jesus from little tiny Nazareth in Galilee.

Hosanna in the highest.

Amen