“Who Is This?” GPPC 4-9-17

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 21:1-11

In 1962, in the preface to her short novel, *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor said, “That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it is a matter of no great consequence.”

Who is this Jesus? Is faith in him a matter of life and death or a matter of no great consequence? As Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, Matthew has us ask ourselves that question yet again. Who is this?

Many of us know the story. Jesus has told his disciples not once, not twice but three times he is going to be betrayed, rejected, tortured, killed, and then after three days resurrected. Three times Jesus has told his disciples this, but they still don’t understand. And Jesus knows that Jerusalem is where these events will unfold.

Does it ever cross Jesus’ mind simply to change the itinerary, turn around, and go back home to Nazareth? Go back home. Work as a carpenter. Settle down. Get married. Have some kids, maybe some grandkids. Wouldn’t that be the life? Does Jesus ever think about that? We don’t know. We just know he *chooses* to come into Jerusalem.

Matthew says Jesus and the disciples reach Bethphage about a mile outside of Jerusalem. Jesus sends two of his disciples into the village. “Go get a donkey and a colt and bring them to me. If anybody asks what you’re doing, just say, ‘The Lord needs them.’” As Matthew says this is the fulfillment of what the prophet Zechariah predicted long ago. “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Matthew takes Zechariah’s poetry literally and has Jesus coming into Jerusalem on two animals, while the other gospel writers read Zechariah as poetry and have Jesus coming into Jerusalem on one animal.

But one or two animals, it doesn’t really matter much, does it? What matters is, “Who is this?”

As Zechariah prophecies, “Look, your *king* is coming to you…” Everything that will happen over the next week should be framed with that in mind. Jesus who comes is not merely a miracle worker, a spiritual revolutionary, a wise teacher, a threat to the Roman Empire—he’s not just those things. He is king. He is the being of God come into human flesh and the being of God sovereign over the universe. He is the One who speaks and what he says comes to be. He is the One who reveals what God’s ruling over the universe and us looks like and how it will finally look when time ends and God’s kingdom is at last ushered into its fullness. Who is this Jesus? He is king.

But what kind of king? As Matthew says, “humble and mounted on a donkey.” The Greek word humble here means “not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, gentle, considerate, unassuming.” That’s the kind of ruler Jesus is—the model for every person who would be a leader. That’s the kind of king Jesus is—gentle, humble, considerate, unassuming.

Many years ago in my second or third year at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, I worked part-time as a chaplain at a home for boys. At the time, many of the boys at the home were adjudicated youth. A good number of them had been abused. I remember one boy actually slept under his bed because he’d learned it was safer for him to sleep there.

I was in my late twenties and, of course, knew practically nothing about how to work with these poor suffering kids. But I was being paid to lead a weekly Bible study with them and to lead worship on some Sundays. I tried to lead the Bible study, but I wasn’t very good at it, and most of the boys weren’t particularly interested. So I’d go down to the gym and try to play basketball with them. And that worked a little better. “Come on, Rev! I’m fixing to dunk on you, Rev!” My older son refers to this time in my life as my brief but happy professional basketball career.

I was not much more successful at getting the boys to come to Sunday worship either. And one of the staff members, my supervisor, said we should come up with a way to force the kids to come. I said, “I’m not comfortable forcing the boys to come to worship.” And he said, “Doesn’t it say in the Bible ‘*compel* them to come in.’?” Yes, I suppose it does.

But Jesus is the gentle, humble, considerate, unassuming king. In a world in which leadership is often equated with unbridled aggression and unrestrained insult, Jesus is our model for leadership. We are not to lead by forcing people into worship but by inviting them. We are to lead people into deeper relationship with God not with coercion but with gentle truth.

Presbyterian writer Marjorie Thompson says, “Love is God’s hunger for relationship with us. Has it ever occurred to us that God is starved for our companionship?

“Not long ago [she says] I was stricken by the comments of a colleague, a woman of deep prayer. She was describing what she had heard in response to the question she puts before Jesus each morning. Her question is, What do you want me to tell the people? For many years the response she received was, Tell the people that I love them. Then one day the reply came: Tell the people that I miss them.” (Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 11-12.)

When the people of God neglect to spend time with God in worship, God is starved for our companionship. When the people of God turn aside from prayer, learning Scripture together, engaging in fellowship and service in Christian community, God is starved for our companionship. And whether *we* recognize it or not, we are also starved for that companionship with God. The God we know in Jesus Christ wants a deeper relationship with each of us, but God will not force that upon us. We must choose.

Matthew says the humble, gentle king Jesus comes into Jerusalem riding a donkey, a colt, not a war stallion. A crowd spreads their cloaks on the road, and other people cut tree branches and spread them out on the road—typical ways to honor a king. People go ahead and behind Jesus yelling, “Hosanna!” an Aramaic word that originally meant “help,” but here probably means something more like “Yay!” or “Praise God!” The people yell hosanna for the One who is help for all the world and hosanna for the One who deserves our praise. A wonderful parade for Jesus.

But some scholars think there’s another parade going on at the same time in 30 A.D. They say the peasants marching with Jesus enter the city from the east. But the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, rides a war stallion into the city from the west as he leads an army brought into town to keep order for the Roman Empire during the Jewish Passover festival. So there’s a clash not just of parades but a clash of visions. (John Rollefson referencing Borg and Crossan in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2*, 153.)

We know the Empire’s vision. It’s all about greed and ruthless power, exercising control through violence and threat of violence. And weapons upon weapons upon weapons. You can never have too many, you know. Empire is uninterested in the poor or the vulnerable. It is not concerned with fairness, just with getting its way. We know Empire’s vision and its sayings. Nice guys finish last. Give war a chance. Whoever dies with the most toys wins. That’s Empire’s vision. Are we attracted to it? Even a little?

But then there is the vision of Jesus. As a Bible scholar points out, Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah. He “does not mount a horse; instead, he will abolish war chariots and weapons and bring peace to the nations…That Jesus rides on a donkey and on the colt of a donkey is to be understood as an expression of his kindness, peaceableness, and gentleness.” (Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28* in the Hermeneia Commentary Series, 7-8.)

Jesus spends his life healing the sick, preaching good news to the poor, bringing down the arrogant, lifting up the abused and vulnerable, forgiving the sinful, and living as a servant not as a tyrant. This is the vision of Jesus. Are we attracted to it? Threatened by it? Captured by it?

Matthew says when Jesus enters Jerusalem the whole city is shaken by presence, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds say, “This is the prophet Jesus…” And we know he is that, but so much more than that.

Who is this Jesus? A matter of life and death or a matter of no great consequence? Who is this Jesus who comes into Jerusalem to give his life for you and me and the world? Is this the king who sets our values and life priorities? Is this the king who is ruler over every part of our lives—our time, abilities, and money, our politics, our weekdays, our Sundays? Who is this Jesus? A word we mutter when we’re upset? A name we invoke when it is convenient? Or Lord of our lives?

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